



# **The Tuk-Tuk Diaries: Preludes and Postcards**

**Poems by Bryan Thao Worra  
1991-2012**

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The Tuk-Tuk Diaries: Preludes and Postcards  
[written by] Bryan Thao Worra

*To those who remember,  
To those who remain,  
and to those who change*

## *Preface*

The *Tuk-Tuk Diaries: Preludes and Postcards* emerged from a number of questions during my journey as a poet, particularly between the 10-year period of 2002-2012 which reflected my first return back to Southeast Asia since I was born there in 1973.

The original idea had been to simply reprint my 16-poem chapbook “The Tuk-Tuk Diaries: My Dinner with Clusterbombs” from Unarmed Press in 2003, but I ultimately really wanted to provide my readers with something that could show where I’d been and where I might be going in the next decade. Also, there were a few publishing issues that emerged where it feels prudent to have a broad retrospective available.

This collection now includes selections from my books and chapbooks “The Tuk-Tuk Diaries: My Dinner with Clusterbombs,” “Touching Detonations,” “Monstro,” “Tanon Sai Jai,” “On the Other Side of the Eye,” “Winter Ink,” BARROW,” and several other smaller chapbooks and project fragments, such as “Japonisme, Laoisme,” “Collisions Between the American Dream and the American Dreamer,” “A Memory of Remains” and “The Burning Mirror.” I hope you enjoy it, and in turn consider sharing your voice with the world in the years ahead, too.

Bryan Thao Worra  
California-Minnesota,  
December, 2014

## CONTENTS

What Kills A Man	1
In The Beginning	2
The Tuk-Tuk Diaries, Part I	4
Recovering From War	6
The Artist And War (Fragments)	7
Imperious	8
New Myths Of The Northern Land	9
Burning Eden One Branch At A Time	10
April Reflection	11
On A Stairway In Luang Prabang	12
The Grass	13
Notes Regarding The Living Heart	14
Night	15
Hmong Market At Luang Prabang	16
Phonsavan	17
Nam	18
Nerakhoon	19
At Home	20
Laab	21
Tom Mak Hung	22
Phaeng Mae	23
No Regrets	24
Try This	25
Mon	27
A Familiar Dance	28
The Statistics Of Forwards	29
Our Brave New World	31
Midwestern Conversations	32
Middle Path	33
Surprises In America	34
Laos In The House	35
Padaek	37

Commodity	38
Na	39
The Needs Of Romance	40
Her Body, My Monuments	42
Planting	43
Sao Lao	44
Discussing Principles Of Art With Laotians	45
Perhaps	48
Aliens	49
Oni	50
Moon Crossing Bone	52
An Archaeology Of Snow Forts	53
Before Going Feral	54
Babylon Gallery	55
Io	57
Song Of The Kaiju	59
Little Bear (Ursa Minor)	61
Observing The Oblivious	62
Five Fragments	63
The Ghost Nang Nak	68
A Little Bat	69
Fury	70
Maggots	72
An Exhibition Of Korean Document Boxes	73
Wisdom	75
Song For A Sansei	78
Paperfold And Ink	79
Anthology	80
The Big G.	81
Origami	82
Tsunenaru's Wife (?-1804)	83
Ukihashi	84
Kobe Hotel	87
Kanshi	88

A Letter To Amida	89
Dreams From A Cell	90
Kawaii	91
Dreaming	92
Schrödinger Zen	93
A Tanka For Murasaki Shikibu	94
Iai	95
Nitenichi	95
That Was Zen, This Is Tao	96
Enso	97
Warhammer	98
Building A Library	99
The Watermelon	101
Kingdoms	103
Thread Between Stone	104
Carbon	107
Moments In The Eye	108
Pavlov's Menagerie Ruminates	109
Zelkova Tree	110
Whorl	111
Here, The River Haunt	113
Anger	114
Today's Special At The Shuang Cheng	115
Still Life	116
Fieldcraft	117
The Shape	119
A Question Of Place	120
Tetragrammaton	121
To An Old Tune	123
Mythologies	124
A Hmong Goodbye	125
A Vision Of Invasion	127
Wight	128
My Autopsy, Thank You	129

Poultry	131
Preguntas	132
What Tomorrow Takes Away	133
The Hymn Of Stones	134
Xxii	135
Vocabularies	136
Chartreuse	138
Homunculus	139
Genesis 2020	140
The Dancer Introduces One Of His Aspects	141
Labyrinth	142
Metropolis	143
To The Pet Shop Gecko	146
Modern Life	147
Perspectives	148
The Big G.	150
Cobra	151
2019 Blues	152
Legion	153
Zhū Bājiè	154
Minotaur	156
Reconsidering Gordian	157
My Autopsy, Thank You	158
For The Friend Who Will Never Read This	159
The Caves Of Pak Ou	160
The Crater	162
Libertree	163
Pastimes	165
Lady Xoc	167
Everything Belongs To The Spider	169
Severances	170
Shuttle	171
A Sum Of Threads	172
Tie: A Knot's Perspective	173



Acts Of Confession	174
Mischief In The Heavens	175
Dragon Jazz	176
Thank You, Professor Rose	177
Tempus Fugit	178
Soap	179
Saigon Autumn	181
East Meets West	182
The Fifth Wish	183
Insomniacafe	184
The You Do Devil	185
Hey, Einstein	186
Acorn	187
Ketsana Haiku	188
One Day	189
Evolve	191
How To Build A Boat	193
Ink: A Recipe	197
Aftermaths	198
Boun	199
A Wat Is To Temple	201
As To Escape Is To Survive	201
Golden Triangle, Holy Mountain	202
Hmong Market At Luang Prabang	203
Our Dinner With Cluster Bombs	204
E Pluribus Unum	206
A Crime In Xieng Khouang	207
Khop Jai For Nothing, Falangs	209
The National Library Of Laos	211
Recovery	213
Departures	215
Jaew	217
Leuk Lao	218

*What Kills A Man*

Always small things:  
A round.  
Holes.

Fumes.  
Edges.

Split atoms.  
A second.

A footstep.  
A sip. A bite. A word. A cell.

A motion. An emotion. A dream.  
A fool.

A bit of salt. A drop. A fragment.  
The true root of arguments.

What kills a man is mysterious  
Only in how minute the culprit  
Behind the blow.

We're careless, and forget:  
Even when what kills a man  
Is another man,

It is a small thing that kills a man,  
The whole earth a single grain

On a sprawling table filled with the smallest things.

## *In The Beginning*

Depending on the tradition, you hear:  
There was nothing, or there was chaos.  
No time, no space, not even a single atom

Not a ray of light, a whisper,  
No scent of papaya or rivers.

Not a body, not a soul.  
Not a ghost of a dok champa

Or even a memory

Of a touch in the darkness,  
Or a taste of a home-cooked meal from

A tiny garden in the window  
Of a dreaming woman

Asleep amid her books and clothes,  
Her brushes and tools.

In the beginning, though, there  
Was no hate, no war, no anger,

No constant return to life after life  
Because of our ignorance and lusts.

Still, I look back with no regrets  
At our world of fires and love, of ice and hope.

My mouth opens in song  
In the brief time upon Earth I have,

Creating amid destruction.

Growing against silence.

## *The Tuk-Tuk Diaries, Part I*

Roar. Sputter and vroom  
Take a hard turn at 60  
With a glittering “beep beep”  
Down a street of mutts and roaming butts

Smoke and flesh, beer splashing,  
Cash flashing just below waste-level.

Take a ride, farang, and see what  
A handful of baht and some bargaining gets you  
By the time that you come to a stop in Bangkok,  
The city of insomniac angels.

Just be sure to watch your luggage at all times.

### *II.*

Khaosan Road is canned Chaos, an eternal Friday  
Of wolf whistles and smoke.  
Even at noon, you could fall into a raving patch of  
Midnight during a full moon  
Just by stepping into the wrong noodle shop.

You can buy crispy critters for a steal  
Or prop up an Akha village for a day  
For the price of a silver bangle during the down season

The music comes at you like a stranger knocking on your door.  
Beware of souls trying to make money off  
Backpacking cheapskates here, reeking of weeds,  
Bad funk and second-hand dreams.  
They’ve seen your kind before and can strip your wallet  
Before you’ve finished your first swallow of the street.  
At least you can get funny T-Shirts here.  
But they shrink.

*III.*

Catch a tuk-tuk to Doi Suthep  
And you can see golden chedi and giant bells,  
Fire a cheap crossbow just past a naga's stony mouth

And sing your songs of heartbreak to the rain  
Using a karaoke machine among the food stalls.

"It's beautiful," I hear a henna-haired tourist gush.  
Her guide, a young boy with a ghastly scorpion tattoo  
Wants to tell her "Take me home with you,"

But doesn't have the words, and just says:  
"Where would you like to go next?"

Trying not to rush her, hoping she doesn't decide  
To stay here forever instead.

*IV.*

In Laos, there's an army of tuk-tuks at the Talaat Sao  
Waiting for the right word to go.  
They slumber, tiny blue dragons,  
With wheels for eyes and wide mouths  
For grinning passengers  
Who never seem to come.

There aren't many places to go besides home,  
The wat and the market  
And glancing next door at those raucous streets  
Of hollow,  
It may be just as well.

## *Recovering From War*

There is a deficit of contact.

To touch is to risk.

To trust contradicts wisdom,  
So ignorance prevails.  
Absent truths (memories)  
Elicit abundant lusts  
Hammered  
With gold, rose and incense  
To reform states we fear  
May rebuild to rewind time  
But not remember:

How we failed the first time  
That we now have fewer  
To remember with

As we rebuild to recover  
Some things terrible

Some, less so.

## *The Artist and War (Fragments)*

I.

Hung across from *Abstract Nature*  
: bellicose icons silent on :  
The wars of Asia.

My love wonders:  
Too painful to face  
Still? Or too familiar  
To require comment on?

II.

A video game designer in Virginia  
Told me: war games on  
Vietnam just don't sell, let alone those  
Of secret wars or killing fields. Besides,  
What karma could such amusements bring?

III.

By the "*Massacre of the Civilian Population*  
*In Timizoara, Romania*"  
I remember:

The "*Winged Victory of Samothrace*"  
A decapitated beauty whose severed neck  
Speaks more truth of victory's real price  
Than those snarling stone lips long since stolen  
For the conquering wheel.



## *Imperious*

In the end, I'm a minor beginning  
Of a love for small empires.

Tiny kingdoms who don't  
Outwear their welcome.

Short reigns, minor abuses,  
Powers and scandals that

Don't tip the earth off her axis.

The kind only daffodils  
And mayflies seem to master

Before becoming one again  
With wet stone, hoary space

That a single atom (with some luck)  
Can convert into an entire new galaxy

Who won't remember us, like a callow child  
Playing in the bluegrass before the rain.

*New Myths of The Northern Land*

"Dream," I said,  
"Aren't you tired of making new legends  
That no one but I ever hears?"

"Bones," she said,  
"Aren't you ever tired of asking questions  
That only I can answer?"

I went back to bed,  
Waiting for the new king to arrive,  
His talking mirror filled

With dire pronouncements of flame.

## *Burning Eden One Branch At A Time*

My father, a skull before the wars were over,  
Never saw my mother's flight in terror  
~~As our humbled kingdom fell to flame and shell~~

My mother was stripped to ink among the bureaucrats,  
A number for their raw statistics of jungle errors  
~~Collated into cold ledgers marked "Classified"~~

My feet dangling in the Mississippi have forgotten  
What the mud in Vientiane feels like between your toes  
While my hands hold foreign leaves and I whisper

"Maple"

"Oak"

"Weeping Willow"

As if saying their names aloud will rebuild my home.

## *April Reflection*

April begins as a joke in a house of children:  
A surprise, a word, a laugh if we're lucky.  
There are still bills and taxes and poems ahead, at least in America.

With a sabaidee we say hello to a new year,  
La kawn to yesterday and the many mornings before.  
The flowers begin to bloom, the rain and wind are welcome.

There are so many places to go these days,  
But only one body and never enough money

To journey to every city where a Lao song, a wise word,  
A festival of dreamers wants to greet you with a smile,  
A nop

Between friends and strangers who might become family  
Or a nation ready to create a better tomorrow  
With the same ease as a wonderful today.

*On A Stairway In Luang Prabang*

Step as you will through life,  
A thousand ways, a thousand places.

Carry a home in your heart  
Or spend years seeking the door  
Where your soul will always smile.

Do you ease the way for others,  
Or just yourself?

Do you climb great mountains  
Just to leave them unchanged?

One day, the heights of holy Phu Si  
Will lay as soft valleys.  
We, only memories.

But our children's children?

Will they, too, have reason to smile,

Like those dreaming strangers  
Who finished their stairs for us?

## *The Grass*

Among jade grass blades  
Even mighty bodhi trees  
Must share the same earth

## *Notes Regarding The Living Heart*

A single seed can turn into a forest.  
A single heart can transform a nation.  
To be brave is jai ka.  
To be generous is jai kwan.  
To test the body, climb a mountain.  
To test the soul, meet another.  
To find happiness, meet as strangers,  
But don't stay that way.  
With a sabaidee, greet the days, one by one.  
With a khop jai and a smile, do what you can  
To change worlds, even one inch, one hand at a time.

That is the path of the jai,  
Human and forever growing.

## *Night*

The roots of true evening

Are not a pale measure  
Of time, of distance between

Stellar bodies, bright flames,  
Divine orbits of shadows.

Night arrives a limb graceful  
As a gilded court dancer of Lane Xang,

Her hair unfurling  
By onyx inches

With a smile bright  
As the first dok champa  
In bloom,

Departs in the morning  
Like a dream,

A beauty in an orange dress.



### *Hmong Market At Luang Prabang*

If I am successful,  
I will be immortal and misunderstood.

If these emaciated girls on the candlelit street  
Of Luang Prabang are successful,

They understand they will live for another melting day  
Dreaming idly of an ink-faced man like me  
Who will whisk them away for good,

Only he's perfect, always remembering his pinky promise  
To come back the next night

To buy their dusty bed sheets  
For a fistful of wrinkled kip.

*Phonsavan*

A stretch and sprawl of plain and hill  
Where stones survive the coldest clouds,

You're jars and trails and scars  
Rebuilding your shattered face  
One hammered bullet at a time.

The heart of Laos beats here,  
Desperate as a bush-meat market  
Of endangered beasts  
Hungry for change,  
Weaving adversity into opportunity.

You're a place where  
The long-haired goddess of Hope  
Is always itching to leave, but she's

A good daughter who always finds  
One more chore she's needed for,

Who never quite makes it out the door.

## *Nam*

Beneath, there's life.

Above, there's life.

The fierce sun tucks himself away  
After a long day standing  
Like a snaggle-toothed Yak  
Over lush plains of green and stone,

Valleys and smoking mountains  
Thick with the scent of ash  
And hot rice,

Our alluring cities filled  
With humble jewels

The hue of families in love  
And guests being welcomed

By a gentle nop.

## *Nerakhoon*

I love our traditions but our ways must change, too,  
If I want a tomorrow worth having.

We have rites and ways of setting things right,  
But it's sad we need to have those already.

That we've wronged each other so often before  
It's become routine.

I can forgive all of this, but

What a place this might be where the soul doesn't need a map,  
A reason, an order to be kind.

For such a world,  
I would happily release one last turtle to the sea,  
A raven to the winds, whatever needs to be free

If only I could believe and trust  
Words and hearts and destiny.

## *At Home*

When I am in your home,  
I am back to Laos after a lifetime.  
I am in a place beyond words:

Where the steam of the kitchen

The smell of warm coffee

The sound of a television

The taste of a meal made with kindness

All feel like an America where our dreams come true,  
Our memories return

And everything lost is found once more  
Waiting with a smile, a sabaidee.

## *Laab*

Luck.

The spirits enjoy suggesting not everything is written down  
Ahead of time.

There are mysteries for *everyone* without exception  
In the secret books and ledgers of the heavens.

On earth, you can change your position and fortunes?  
These hopes make life worth living.

There's a thrill of unknown possibilities,  
Amazing journeys, an end to sorrows, new roads, new cities of joy  
And spice

Vibrant as a Vientiane melody or a Vegas wink.

We can taste it. Crave it. But it still takes much work to make it.  
And it's truly best when shared.

## *Tom Mak Hung*

We think them plentiful, like jumping shrimp and tiny crabs:  
These mak hung, these chilies, the base for padaek.  
The mouth waters with even a mention.

Every heart of Laos knows it well.  
Cross oceans and mountains, battlefield and basement,  
Oz or Kyrgyzstan, Modesto or Nashville, Phoenix or Pakse.

Meet anyone who can say sabaidee or a word of passa lao.  
Even if they don't remember their history or family,  
How to nop or how to fon, or the secrets to singing a good mor lum  
We still become one again with as little as a dish.

Our bellies fill like an ancient queen, a saint of Laos,  
Our heroines and heroes, our elders and children,  
The clever beauties and the dreaming scholars.

Pounding away until it's so hot you sweat,  
A mix of sweet and salt, starch and bite  
What poet, what priest,  
What politician, what legend can truly compete or compare?

We sing of the fine dok champa, but our people also sleep  
With memories of mak hung, a smile, a tongue afire.

*Phaeng Mae*

I could tell you stories, brief,  
Short as the time it takes a raindrop to reach the earth and oceans.

In this life, I won't be able to say  
Everything that could be said, should be said

About the jars near Xieng Khouang, the bombs of old  
With their dreams of flame and scars.

There are eternal pairs of birds, friends of our fathers,  
Great beauties of flesh and stone, voices longing  
Among the sharing, the generous, the witnesses who remain.

A whole cosmos awaits.

In this life, I won't be able to say  
Everything that could be said, should be said  
But I'll say as much as I can.

If you won't spare twelve words for your family,  
Your people, not even enough to compete with a soup can label,  
How can you expect strangers to tell your children  
Of your yesterdays and all our future tomorrows?

I will tell you stories, brief,  
Short as the time it takes the sun to set one last time on a nation,  
A life,

Hoping, always hoping, I will hear a story from you, too.



## *No Regrets*

Maybe one day,  
A page will be found,  
A song will be heard,  
A stroke will be drawn  
Filled with explanations.

Maybe one day,  
The nuckawi and silapin, beautiful as a field of khao mai  
Will be vindicated.

A family will start.

A child will learn the names of a stranger who believed in them  
Before they even met.

Maybe one day,  
A heart will remember a brother, a sister, a crime, a moment of love,  
A chronicle of a city, a haiku from Japan.  
A teacher.  
A friend on the other side of your eye.

Until then, what is certain?  
Night arrives, then day. The moon, the sun, the rain and waves.  
A few other things, maybe something someone will write down.  
Maybe not.

### *Try This*

One day, a moment might bloom  
Like a wild frangipani or an urban forsythia.

Mae, looking at your body, your hair,  
These grown hands that hold her,  
Will lean near your ear and whisper:  
“You are not my only masterpiece,  
But you are still one of mine.”

She takes a familiar brush out.  
You know what comes next,  
But even routines can teach  
As we ponder whose arms  
Will stretch out to embrace us from tomorrow,  
Those galleries prepared for the wondering soul.

## *A Thousand Smiles*

What is beautiful if not unique?  
Wisdom without kindness?  
Life, free of true challenge?  
May as well seek dreams without change,

Poems without language.

Her stride awakes our stories.  
Her smile,  
Her breath,  
Dawn at the edge of Nam Ou,

Returns our hearts to our limitless nations within us.

## *Mon*

When I go to sleep there is a distant city for a nation,  
And in that city a street at night, fragrant as a frangipani.  
On that street there is a house, there is a room, there is a pillow,  
Soft and welcoming like a strong woman's smile  
Who reminds me of everything a world is supposed to be,  
One dream at a time, where I want to whisper, a phoenix,  
"I don't want to be a stranger," but I barely have the words.

## *A Familiar Dance*

I take you to dance  
In your dress of blue.  
Santana's black magic woman is playing tonight.

Swaying to the music, I wonder about your true home,  
Your tangled story, your fine shelves of books.  
I have an ocean of questions but a thimble of time.

Maybe *The Art of War* will be there.  
Maybe a classic of the ancients, something curious and modern,  
Written in ink dark, lustrous as your hair.

I want to turn pages tonight,  
The secret histories rewritten  
To remember us...

You walk away when the boun is done without a word.  
I, watching like a period becoming an exclamation point,  
Laugh, filled to the edge where the soul meets the body.

We, the momentary.

## *The Statistics of Forwards*

It's a hard thing, knowing:  
You cannot compete with  
that dirty joke  
found on the back of Miss August,

And Danish porn and a timely ESPN score  
is more likely to be spread around  
than a simple Laotian's best poem.

It's nothing against  
that little girl with the virus  
that could destroy the world  
or the little bug-eyed boy  
without the kidney  
who, like a kinder Walt Disney,  
wants to give you a green dollar bill  
on behalf of that giant Microsoft,  
just for pressing a button  
to send his deathbed prayers on their way  
to nine of your closest friends  
for good luck.

Today, it's just depressing,  
and maybe it's time to put down this pen,

run out into the streets  
filled with Hondas and SUVs,

take a last leap for the evening  
like a glittering moth  
toying with suicide  
by the porch light

and buy some ice cream  
for my friends  
laughing with them until dawn instead.

## *Our Brave New World*

There's only a few in creation  
Who read me like you.

So it goes.

I, debating between Heaven and Earth,  
The wild bunch and the truths regarding better luck tomorrow,  
A better tomorrow where maybe every woman can be  
The princess bride in a never ending story, a legend.

You, watching with me in your own way,  
Seeking stories nearly a continent away,  
A phoenix of rebuilding  
As familiar with Nang Phom Hom as the legends of the Fall.

We listen, hearing hearts within bodies with so much to teach,  
So much to smile about.

Surviving like bamboo, some moments arriving as slow hurricane,  
Some like Kansas twisters, offering a journey to Oz.

Some a desert, others, a city by the sea in a state of lost angels,  
Wandering xang and atomic sinners, strangers sharing space  
And sometimes more.



## *Midwestern Conversations*

"You're the whitest guy I know,"  
Nate tells me over a backyard BBQ  
At the end of high school.

It's supposed to be a compliment.

"You speak English even better  
Than some of the students who were born here,"  
A teacher tells me after hours.

And it's true.

"I'm pulling you over, sir,  
Because frankly, you look like one of the bad guys,"  
A cop tells me, his hand on a holstered Glock  
In Ohio. "And you've got an awful lot of cash on you."

But I'm just getting my rent for my land lady  
Who doesn't trust my checks!

The other day, a young writer sent me a poem  
entitled, "I Can Be White."

My heart can't give it an iota of serious consideration,  
*Although it's entirely possible I'm just projecting.*

## *Middle Path*

Since the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.,  
The Buddha has said  
The right perspective,  
The right motive,  
The right words,  
The right action,  
The right job,  
The right effort,  
The right awareness  
And concentration  
Are the simple keys to happiness in a world of complex pains.

In America, this is enough to get you filed  
Under New Age Witchcraft, and banned from  
Ice cream socials.

## *Surprises in America*

It took me by surprise that Hitler was a vegetarian.

Rudolf Hess, too.

I remember reading about them as a boy.

I remember the outrage when someone asked us to forgive them

Because the two would pet their dogs before night.

It took me by surprise that "Soldier of Fortune" offered a reward

For Idi Amin.

Paid in gold.

Dead or alive.

It was a lot of money.

What does it say when mercenaries set bounties on tyrants' heads?

It took me by surprise that we weren't always the good guys.

What couldn't we buy in the land of the free?

Why couldn't we go where we weren't welcome?

It struck me by surprise that many people didn't believe

I was an American,

When I had lived here all of my life.

(Except for that two-day trip to Toronto.)

If they had told me instead that my mother had died,

I don't think I would have been as surprised.

## *Laos in the House*

When has a house gone Lao?  
There may not be one precise event.

It's not only the first time a fresh batch of padaek is made by grandma.  
It takes more than a few servings of tom mak hung in the kitchen.

A six-pack of cold Heinekens and BeerLao in the creaking cooler,  
Or bottles of very fine cognac and homemade rice whiskey  
Can't combine by themselves in the cabinet  
For this magic moment, awaiting the change like good guests,  
Like a cluttered porch of friendly shoes and worn sandals.

Yes, a living room baci calls many things, so can talk of pi mai lao  
Or makeshift shelves for those Lao icons we all know so well,  
But even a happy nop in the hall is not all that's needed for  
transformation.

Such a house does not require Lao dramas, but it's surprising  
If those don't eventually show up, as certain as  
A child's tears from their first taste of jaew at the family table.

Scents of mint and bamboo and barbecues sunk into the beams?  
Watching someone live out their silapin dreams in a basement  
Just because they found a microphone and synthesizer?  
Not the sole keys, and neither is a sincere khop jai, surprisingly.

Maybe you invited mae and I and all of my family from every corner.  
We might speak of numbers and lotteries and years as refugees,  
Host to a thousand small arguments and soft mangos,  
Memories of Chinatowns, gilded wats and the buildings of antiquity.

These all build a house, a nation, a people holding together.  
And in that house there will be dreams, things lost and things sought.

One by one, they shuffle in with a bright smile white as grains of warm khao.

But a house has gone Lao only when the hearts within have chosen so,  
Free as the wind, remembering like stones,  
Growing flowers for moving stars.

## *Padaek*

Speak to me of padaek  
And some poor ba ferments, pungent, chunky and spicy.  
Alas, so unlikely to catch on like sriracha or sushi,  
At least in this century.

I look at your lips, appreciatively pondering  
All that passed beyond those lovely gates for your jai ngam lai,  
Where even the last bit of fish is not forgotten or left behind.

## *Commodity*

Yesterday, mother  
Became a hunter.

There were no words  
For what she was

Looking for:

Even her children were  
Just strangers here,

Eating away their  
Foreignness by forgetting

Memories meant to be alien and true

Amid aisles of stores  
Who don't buy the change her family can bring.

She holds a pomegranate  
and cries,  
so close.

*Na*

Her eyes weave stories  
Worth seeking

Who can speak of the khuam ngam,  
The heart, without the spirit?

May as well  
Ask rivers to leave the shore,  
The moon to abandon the night,

Dreams to leave our lips.



## *The Needs of Romance*

There's a Lao boy who needs poems  
To win over the lovely sao Lao down  
His street before the sun  
Is gone  
                    and night changes her outfit  
To the shade of a slinky summer moon.

The bookstores there can feed him  
The old standbys,  
                    but she knows  
The warbling of the dead  
When she hears it,  
So that's not going to get anyone  
Any further  
Than a closed door the color of lonely.

He needs words to tell her:  
Every road in his life leads only to her.

Every hair on her head is a monument  
To a beautiful nation, and every inch  
Of her perfect skin is a song that ends in love.

He needs ways to praise the marvels that are  
Her hands, her arms, her every limb  
That beckons him: Explore

                    The great jewel of her bright life,  
                    A fierce dancing fire alive to his touch.

He wants to feel his breath with hers near  
The nocturnal edge of eternity and its vast oceans,  
So pure and feminine against his continents of hope.

Slipping rhythmically between the great arcs and curves of  
Her magnificent Laotian body, he needs words  
Profound, deep, relentless as the memory of old countries  
Where this must have been so much easier to say  
Than today.

But where is he going to find these words,  
If no one will write them?

*Her Body, My Monuments*

Fierce as a thirsty nak  
In April

Nestled in a dress  
The hue of sleepy That Dam  
On Chantha Khoumane

Her lissome stride  
Awakes dreamers

The colors of the world,  
The children of rivers,

Our sandalwood city  
Where talaats greet the moon,  
Phi dance with dreams

And the future begins to stir  
Not with a yawn, but her laugh,  
A gaze

That has known stars the way  
Others know flowers.

## *Planting*

The farmers, the gardeners of the world  
Bend to the earth on every continent

Seeds in hand, holes in the soil like  
A hungry mouth dark with mystery.

Touch her with a word from the page, she smiles.  
Touch her with a hand at night

A million things might happen

Like a young shoot climbing from the ground  
Who might become

A field, a shade forest, a bit of soup

On a complicated evening  
When she needs it most.

*Sao Lao*

When she says my true name as 'Ai Somnoux,'  
Giggling in passa Lao, I'm shaken  
And think she's beautiful in these shadows.

It's too simple to get me to smile.  
It's too simple to remind me of home.

The rules to get my attention should be as  
Complicated as Cold War politics and not  
A button that's simply the sound of her voice.

I reminisce in abstraction,  
Distracted by what it takes to make me miss Laos so.

Not a face. Not a memory of an illicit touch:

The pressure of her slim fingers against mine,  
A warm smile with the scent of distant Sam Neua.

A breath of whisper and papaya.  
Thick hair the hue of night and lustrous brass.

A dance within a sliver of time between two  
Who might have nothing in common besides a mere war.

None of these are necessary to me,  
Slowly undoing my buttons back home alone

Ashamed I want to remember the sound of my own name  
So much.

Whispering hers, when she cannot hear me.

## *Discussing Principles of Art with Laotians*

If we took a cue from one Chinese system of old:

The idea of *Suilei Fucai*

Should probably be noted as

Si : Colors matching the model.

*Gufa Yongbi*

Concerns the proper brushes, paeng.

But I know of amazing children in Pakse

Trying their best to paint worlds

With leftover house paint

In the June rain beneath

A leaking ceiling

And nary a nai khu

In sight to guide them.

*Yingwu Xiangxing* is

About accuracy,

Loyalty, faithfulness

In showing forms.

It is beyond what a photo tells,

Striking deep within to capture

The true beauty of That Luang or

The roar of the Kouangsi waterfall.

It is about truth, theuk tawng

And nothing less.

The principle of *Jinying Weizhi*

Weights in about composition.

The best sao-na plant their crops

With a plan, their eyes and hands

As one, so too the nuckawi

Whose plants cause ideas to grow.

If we speak of *Chuanyì Muxie*  
We are talking about traditions  
Turning to *meu wan ni* with a nop  
To build a bridge to our visions  
With the wisdom of what's worked before.  
And might yet again.

And last, that of *Qiyun Shengdong*;  
Harmony, that which leaves us *di jai*  
When the physical moves in unity  
With the unseen spirits and energies—  
*Pha lang ngan* that is inexpressible,  
Powering a child's smile  
With the same ease as changing a season.

I recently met a man who gave up  
The artist's way to be a petty politico.

He was going to:  
Change the world and be happy.

But I could only pity him  
And his doomed laws of state.  
Remembering

No one follows the hoarse orders of  
The Yellow Emperor Huangdi  
Today, and even his marvelous  
discoveries have faded away  
Thanks to curious eyes.

But the art of his hour  
Still thrives  
With a thousand things to say.

\*\*\*

Alas, I fear my mother still would sleep better  
If she thought I was a doctor instead.



## *Perhaps*

The night needs stars  
The way oceans need waves,  
The eye needs beauty,  
The heart needs kindness,  
The body needs another

Who understands without fear,  
Who listens with gentleness,  
Who transforms without judgment,

Who dreams with love,  
Waking worlds, whole stars like a perfect kiss.

The way it should be.

## *Aliens*

We turn our dishes to  
Heaven, but

What manner of dog will come running  
To lick them,

Drawn to the censored moaning groins  
And the pyrotechnics of false death  
And chemical love?

Fetch me a big stick to shake  
At these stellar voyeurs!

I want nothing to do with them

As I run down my strange streets,  
An accidental alien without  
A ray gun.

## *Oni*

My demons have names I try to keep  
To myself  
A scimitar smile as I walk with them in Spring  
A snarl and a python handshake  
That wants to slither away with you

### II.

Am I a dog in Demon State  
Or a demon in Dog City?  
Easy to say, difficult to believe,  
I can show you the way, in either case

### III.

I miss the cherry blossoms of DC  
My little memories rattling like the Metro  
Through Farragut Station

### IV.

Rest, Mishima,  
Rest your beautiful skull  
In the field by Ono no Komachi–  
Dream amid the leaves and stone walls,  
Let the wind shout of forgotten Yamato for you.  
It's been 30 years already.  
You're becoming a cartoon  
While the girl is an idle monk's mocking brush stroke.

V.

Could Sojobo have slain Shuten Doji?  
Unworthy speculation!

Your pen should be remembering the slaughter  
Of Khoua Her's tiny waifs

Or the death of Tong Kue

The drowned of the Mekong

Or even poor Vincent Chin  
Struggling for his last breath

Beneath Detroit bats  
Devoid of pity

VI.

No matter what I shout  
There isn't a stone on the earth that will shatter today.

## *Moon Crossing Bone*

Lover of change, of delta  
Of poetry stuffed with raw porcelain  
And craters of saddened basalt

Glide your light across my beams of pale  
They gleam beneath silver and bolts of sin  
Beneath my currents and soft bridges  
Erected to span my humble limbs like chains

Oh, kiss them, for the sake of memory  
For the sake of secrets as intangible as dreams  
As meaningful as the dark hair tangling

My darling's hands as she struggles  
To become clean, to break free of mud  
And to sing for the true naks sleeping beneath

Black stupas your candelabra face always forgets  
Are there.

## *An Archaeology of Snow Forts*

There's not much left to be said  
Some well-washed stone hasn't heard before.

History is composed of broken walls and bad neighbors:  
Just ask these chips from Berlin, the Parthenon and Cathay  
Or these cool magma hands of Pompeii, dark and grey.

If you listen carefully in the right place  
On University Avenue, you will learn  
There is a minor wall near the Yalu River  
Dancing on the hills of Qin for the moon,

Who knows exactly what I mean  
In every tongue worth mention.

She's moonlighting as a curved garden serpent  
Coiling around old Laocoon,  
The Suspicious One with his astute eye,  
Crooning with a sly wink,

"Come, touch true history."

And how the moon must laugh when she spies  
The tiniest hill in Minnetonka,  
Where the small hands of the earth have erected

A magnificent white wall,  
A snowy miniature Maginot  
Raised some scant hours before,  
Already melting into a hungry, roiling river  
Who is not yet finished eating Louisiana for brunch.

## *Before Going Feral*

On our Island, among our laws and wise

You see us The Other.

Not parallels:

You spill blood.

Ingest, ejaculate and excrete.

Your graves deep as yourself.

The subject of your open prayers?

Our lively mouths never touch your stiff flesh.

Ever saying 'fetch', you flee

At the first sign of trouble in our heat.

We, neither man nor animal in your eyes,

Blights in a paradise you claim limbo:

How can we not question your perfection?

Creator. Created. Creature

With your cryptic purities.

## *Babylon Gallery*

She brought the gray spoon  
We hung upon the gallery wall  
From the talaat stalls in downtown Phonsavan.  
She was supposed to be collecting dab neeg—folktales

And we were showing off art we were so certain  
Would change the way the world sees

That stumbled elephant we rode in on.

She was an indelicate work, this buang.  
A light cockatrice feather  
Crude malice her center  
Her bowl an echo of bomb craters  
Whispering mad as Gorgon.

“They dine with spoons like this all over there,”  
We’re informed.

“Hammered from war scraps the dogs  
Find indigestible. They sold me this one  
Certain it’s American bullets at the core.”

“It was time, they said, we took them back.”

I pondered how many startled people  
This carnivorous spoon passed through  
in her previous incarnations,

Karma denying her a role in a finer flatware set for the saints.

Oddly, for as many threads as she cut short  
She was too weak to be the butter knife  
She should have been.



Swords into plowshares,  
Someone scribbled casually in a comment card,

One of many remarks  
Disposable as plastic sporks.

## *IO*

Trying to live within the turn  
Of the Wheel and the Screw,  
Our books collect dust, and fade.

Paper is a dying commodity of exchange,  
And people will give you credit to know that.

Raw meaning is lost as the mind oxidizes,  
Infrequently polished with flag,  
    Sackcloth and the spit  
    Of ideology and dogma.

We burn to learn, throwing the promise of ash  
Into the meals of hungry children who no longer  
Want anything more  
Than the truth of a home entertainment system.

They do not dare aspire in a world  
Of hard drives and hard times.

They are the most mortal of futures,  
Who speak in icons, not queries.

They are swept from shore to shore in  
A sea of information,  
Swaddled in silicon chips  
Rocking their thoughts to sleep  
While they travel over  
The great nocturnal depths  
In plastic ships.

Our grand empires of sand cannot spare tokens  
To the impoverished forgotten mass

Conveniently huddled  
As rough statistics upon the page...

Above the din, a cry is announced,  
The great announcement for our age:  
The laws will pass in this land...

No one shall travel who has no reason  
To go somewhere.

No one shall travel beyond the confines of their home,  
As the scientist makes manifest his dreams,  
And teaches his children to dream.

Industrious liquors and chemicals from the factories  
Swirl and melt  
Away

The connections of atom to atom,

of child to parent.

The dreams of the Safavids have now been forgotten,  
A testament to our scholarship.

The merchants have sold us their lenses  
That we may observe their lessons:

With speed, our semis hurtle down highways  
In an explosion of marketing,

Hauling empty trailers back to their homes.

## *Song of the Kaiju*

Through foam,  
Through surf we rise, dark waters parting  
As our titan's foot breaks the shore.

Armies rise against us with a roar,  
Guns flaring in the night-

Our cause, our fears, our fight  
Is for historians alone to decide;

We fierce combatants have no time  
To reflect on our footnote's remarks.

In raging moments  
Fists become claws,  
Our small tales lost beneath the crushing weight  
Of epic bloodshed,  
Cities toppling  
Amid the screams  
So out of touch with time:

*Turn back! Turn back!*  
*Turn back, you mighty beasts!*

But deaf ears mark our reptilian hearts  
That sag and sigh within our wake,  
The tragic years untold, unheard,  
Trampled upon the world's stage.

This isn't Shakespeare, we are no Moors,  
No witch-doomed Scots, we know.

Our loves are not the songs of poets  
Though they rise to a fever

Beneath these scales  
Following our instincts,  
man-made hurricanes mad as Typhon

Filled with the simple potential of half an atom...

### *Little Bear (Ursa Minor)*

If they skin you,  
Will they find a tiny man  
With eyes the color of stars

Or a paw, fury and crimson  
Fierce jaw yearning  
For some cosmic salmon

Longing to scamper  
Across the great latitudes of night  
Against the axis of a mother's boundaries  
Before winter arrives in the heavens

Moaning to forgotten gods  
A child, watching Sirius from afar

Daydreaming of the man daydreaming of you

From his basement  
As he discovers a distended Orion telescope  
During spring cleaning:

Memories awake,  
stretching with a hungry yawn

*Observing the Oblivious*

I squat

Among bamboo and scaly  
Things

Like a stone-faced deity  
From Bayon

The ant devours my puny home  
To make his own.

Fears my magnifying glass  
And sole.

We never look up enough:  
Who knows

If the feet of God  
Aren't about to leave their own mark

On our fragile spines,  
As they uncurl

Beneath his summer home ceiling

When he isn't looking.

*five fragments*

Only 7 people walked away from S-21

My critics ask me to find the beautiful words  
to make this more than a statement.

Chase the rhythms and meter to propel this into true poetry

"Aesthetics mustn't die in literature.

Don't starve language  
with your emaciated lyric.

Don't keep back the flourishes that will set

these words apart

or anger and memories will become only passing wind  
and the tattered spines of your book about this camp  
will be thrown in the garbage  
without even the pomp of a Berlin book burning."

*Surely, the 14,000 would appreciate that,  
who have no eyes, no voice, no hands  
to applaud and cheer anymore.*

They want me to splash in Pol Pot's rivers to find the true tears  
from mere fallen rain

but if you ask my neighbors across the hall?

You will find a particular indifference whether I succeed or not.

II.

When the portraits came  
in black and white

stained and torn without a trace of artistic intent  
they were mounted upon a plain white wall in the Weisman  
across from a stout statue of a squatting Buddha  
and his irresponsible smile.



*Recovered from the mud after  
the Khmer rogues went running,  
there were no names,  
only stenciled numbers that meant nothing  
the next day in the camp.  
How many years have they been touring,  
these haunted faces,  
hoping someone would recognize them long enough  
to restore names to them?*

If the words "It's tragic" cross your lips,  
the odds increase horrifically  
that you will give the matter no further thought  
Within hours.

In the other gallery,  
Dion's solemn *Cabinet of Curiosities*,  
custom assembled for the University  
was amusing the spectators  
with all of the charm of a Renaissance scholar.

All of the usual divisions were there:

Underworld, Sea, and Air.  
The Terrestrial Realm  
Humankind  
The Library and Archive.  
The Allegory of Vision  
The Allegory of Sound and Time  
The Allegory of History

Gaze upon *The Sodomites Descent Into Hell*

A specimen of Algae  
A large hand-painted fan

A freeze-dried cow lung

A set of black Chinese binding shoes  
Birthing forceps from the late 1800s  
(whose modern counterparts have barely changed)

A Napoleonic teapot.

(In the words of Yul Brynner)  
Etcetera, Etcetera, Etcetera.

The day I went, a young woman in green muttered  
to her boyfriend:

"What is this junk from the basement? It's not art,  
and it doesn't belong here."

Moments later, he replied thoughtfully:  
"I wish they validated parking."

### III.

When the B-52s pummeled Neak Luong by accident  
over a hundred Khmer died without cause  
with no more ceremony  
than a shrill whistle and a burst of flame and shrapnel  
from a mile high.

Ambassador Swank came to assuage the grief  
of those who survived with the grand gesture  
of \$100 bills, American.

\*according to an anguished footnote from a man who  
had read about the matter in a London paper at the time

A woman I know from a village near  
Angkor Wat

tries to escape the nightmares of the camps today  
by filling her house with  
tropical trees and flowers from her homeland  
she remembered as a little girl

IV.

In 1990, over an after-school match of Trivial Pursuit  
my teacher asked  
“What is the name of the country where Pol Pot  
instituted Year Zero,  
killing thousands of his countrymen?”

“Cambodia,” I answered with certainty,  
confident and familiar.

“No,” he replied.

No? What the hell is it, then?

“The card says Kampuchea.”

It's the same thing.

“No, it's not.”

Ten years later, I can't believe I argued over that point  
as I stare at crude wooden tables piled with skulls  
near Phnom Penh.

V.

In two years, I don't believe I've said more  
than a dozen words to my Khmer neighbors  
in the apartment below me.  
That's just the way it is.

The other day, I walked past the grandmother

trying to talk to her Hmong counterpart  
across the hall.

Broken English  
hesitant and uncertain  
had become the bridge as each stood in their doorway  
fumbling towards something resembling an ordinary  
conversation.  
Gardening and grandchildren seemed to be the subject.

I still don't know what to make of it all,  
my head heavy as a mango  
without a mouth to feed

## *The Ghost Nang Nak*

Hates the draft.  
Isn't very good on issues  
Of fertility

But isn't too bad  
With the lottery  
If you pay your respects  
Properly by the takian trees.

She's eating diced mangos  
With a mouth of ebony ants.

Kept company by a  
TV tuned to tacky Thai soap operas.

Surrounded by white mutts  
Who hate black dogs of any pedigree.

Wants a simple life again.  
To set down the Buddha's yellow candles  
For just a minute.

But she has a lot of karma to pay off  
For trying to keep her family together

Spooking mischievous children at night  
Who thinks she's looking for playmates

For her beautiful baby  
Toddling between Wat Mahabut  
And the Prakanong River.

*A Little Bat*

flutters by on the beach  
at noon,  
a tiny klutz clutching  
frantically at the wind.

She doesn't know if  
she is a bird  
or a mouse.

In antique Indochine  
she was mocked by  
hoary men for her indecision

and today, even her  
loving brothers and sisters  
think she's gone mad as a loon

uncertain if she is coming home  
or leaving

for an illicit rendezvous  
with a sleeping moon  
beneath winking canopies of green  
no man has ever seen.

## *Fury*

And I swear sometimes  
I'm going to take this town down

Downtown

Uptown

Around Town

Like a London Bridge  
And a Korean song.

Gonna grab my shabby gear  
And pull down a titan's ear.

Gonna holler till the walls buckle  
Yawping and Squawking

Whatever a man's gotta do  
To get through to you.

The revolution is actually  
A straight line to change

You can't keep going in circles-  
I see that now.

He's left, she's right.  
Who's wrong?

That's not even the question.

You see, we're free.

To Be in an age of empty  
Is like a period at the end

Of a one-word  
Sentence.

I've got fire at the bottom of my shoes  
Like I scraped myself on a dragon.

I've got a body of mud  
That's tired of being treated like dirt.

I've got water flowing for a heart  
'Cause oceans,

Oceans always get the last word...

And I swear sometimes  
This town ain't gonna take me down



## *Maggots*

Chew their meals with  
Draughts of iron and salt.

They know they hunger,

These mechanics,  
These instruments of turning

With their quiet arias of change,  
Their inventive waltzes  
For raw lacerations.

Live flesh is spared their deliberate groping.

They only have bellies for the dead.

A shaved monk dreads samsara,  
The eternal return.

A young boy saves  
Coins for a bicycle.

Many mothers understand all of these routines,  
Circumambulating their prams before nursing.

## *An Exhibition of Korean Document Boxes*

What did the owners of these ornate boxes  
Tuck away within these spaces?

Love letters? A plan to conquer Japan?  
A tally of harvests and a schedule to excavate  
Vast plots of kim chee?

A poem, not unlike this one?  
A sketch even more beautiful than the box itself?

A letter to the king, suggesting a library  
Where secretly, colorful revolutionaries  
Would scheme against everyone  
But finally be undone by inertia  
And a tiny, unsung grain of rice from the future?

A toy.

A jewel.

A dream.

Something completely inappropriate.

\* \* \*

Witnessing these splendid ham gathered together,

I suspect their original owners would never  
Willingly walk into the same room with one another,  
Or even give  
The craftsmen a grateful nod.

\* \* \*

Returning home, I apologize to my cardboard boxes,  
Packing the miscellaneous into them.

## *Wisdom*

### I.

The Greeks say wisdom begins  
with a face in the mirror that  
says I do not know.

Sun Tzu needed a lovely girl's head to show  
that knowing yourself  
and knowing your foe  
was enough to win a war best won without  
a single drop of blood upon these rosy roads filled with beauty.

Confucius with his aging pupils  
had enough to time to scribble out  
"It is only the wisest and the very stupidest who cannot change."

The lousy old man from Ho-nan in his laid-back way says,  
"Between good and evil, how much difference?"

On the Internet, you can find a copy of the I-Ching  
that will give free readings at a click of the button  
if you're too lazy to toss the coins and yarrow,  
with all of the reliability of a tarot deck stripped  
of the minor arcana.

Exacting physicists in their duty say  
everything that rises must converge  
and every action carries an opposite reaction  
equal and pure.

The zen monks in the mountains think they can  
get away with the "I don't know" of fushiki and  
nothing more than an empty fist.  
If they aren't careful it will cost all of them their lives.

The Chinese say that wisdom begins when you  
begin calling things by their proper names.

An Amway rep (who shall remain anonymous)  
says tough times don't last but tough people do and  
its best to go into business for yourself but not by yourself.  
Such wisdom is as old as the pyramids.

Depending on whom you talk to.

In some cultures,  
it is rude to talk to someone if you have nothing to say,  
and after a time you might find that saying nothing and  
saying something amount to the same thing.

II.

A Hmong man was quoted obscurely:  
"The world is only as large as a man is willing to walk"

Exhausted and weary, the GIs in Kuwait say:  
"Wheels are better than heels."

Mortal Kombat, between its savage rounds contends  
there is no knowledge that is not power.  
It's not worth  
losing your head  
or your heart  
for a quarter.

From the lightless grave,  
Lord Acton wags his ink-stained fingers powerlessly  
  
in disapproval  
about abuse  
and absolutes.

Thundering Mr. Eliot through an April haze  
murmured incomprehensibly  
with a lost Brahmin's lullaby:  
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata,  
while a shrieking young boy from the back streets  
can only see:  
*a wasted mile of indigo ink.*  
It will never be his mantra.

The dog whispers conspiratorially  
If you can not kill it or eat it,  
play with it or sleep with it, or even crap on it,  
Leave it alone.

But then again, they say dreaming dogs lie, don't they?

Huxley wishes that in 60 years he could have produced  
a message more profound than "treat people a little more nicely,"  
while Beatles proclaim  
that all you need is love.

So it goes.

After all of this, a young mother looks at me and asks  
"Why bother looking at all, if that's the best you can give?"

Peering down into that cavernous cradle  
and her trusting baby's lively smile,

How can I come empty handed?

## *Song For A Sansei*

I remember her story

Of a white life

That took some getting used to.

White family. White holidays. White food:  
Codfish, cauliflower, vanilla pudding, potatoes and  
Gravy, poultry, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

A life of snow in which  
I, too, find the mirror of "I Am"

Not necessarily followed by "made of",  
Perhaps simply "Among, with love",  
That you can't help in a world like this

I'd meditate more on her graying words  
But the jazz-soaked bartender at the edge of this dark room  
Is reminding me

We only get 5 minutes each  
To talk about our own yellow lifetimes.

## *Paperfold and Ink*

The little girl makes a thousand cranes  
And I, a thousand poems.  
For her trouble, she gets long life  
And I, well, I don't know.

Maybe I get to come back as a stubborn red ox,  
Or a young ox-herder, a lucky blackbird, or a snoozing puppy  
Who can't be caught easily in a fold of origami

While somewhere, a little book is being printed  
Telling the tale of a little girl and her thousand cranes.



## *Anthology*

If I will not  
write of white rice  
or shades of yellow  
they tell me there is no  
place for me.  
Without a Mekong river of tears  
trailing down a mountain of  
black hair and stale sushi  
I will not be Asian enough  
to fit into this volume  
of Eastern voices for Western coffeehouses.  
You no good if you no talk like  
cereal box-tops about transitions and the old country,  
or grandma and her wizened fortune-cookie wisdom  
amid a comic bevy of oh-so-tragic  
hard-working, heartbreaking restaurateurs  
and cunning launderers  
wandering a crooked Chinatown street.  
They will tell you You  
may have been an English major  
but you'd best keep these nonsense thoughts private  
and give the audience what they want for god's sake.  
Don't rock the boat, people!  
A woman walked up to me recently and asked me  
"What is the name for your yellow hue?"

I said "Color me Pissed"

## *The Big G.*

We don't say his name aloud in serious poetry.  
We close our eyes and say he doesn't exist.  
I am a modern eastern Peter with a mouth of denials  
While the cocks crow at the rising sun.

Right next to a certain master of Jeet Kune Do,  
He stood like a giant torii gate  
Between my heart and the American flag.

How many people were surprised, when my words  
Moved in time with my lips.  
Even today, they still believe my buildings  
Can't stand the test of time, crumbling  
At the first sign of trouble  
Like a pasty French defense  
Only a swarthy legion of strangers can vindicate.

But the old boy's got stamina  
He's neck and neck with James Bond,  
Trampling the Police Academies and Shakespeare plays.

Now, why should I reject this reliable radioactive lug,  
Just to be taken seriously by some stiff academe  
With erectile dysfunction and a bad toupee?

And in learning to love the reptile,  
Perhaps we can learn to love ourselves,  
Atomic halitosis and all.

## *Origami*

Mrs. Hutt, I won't become  
The statesman you hoped I'd be.  
I've turned into a minor poet instead,  
Killing mosquitoes in the summer heat.

Please don't think I wasn't paying attention,  
And didn't profit from your words  
But people like me  
Have to find our own way  
To use paper and ink

To reshape our world  
Of coins and prayers

One square inch at a time.

*Tsunenaru's Wife (?-1804)*

*How beautiful the Buddhist statues*

*At Saga*

*Half hidden in fallen leaves*

She wrote.

But when was Imaizumi born?

Someday I will share her view

Of Buddhist sculptures, now buried

Up to their neck in leaves.

Today, I only know she died in 1804.

## *Ukihashi*

*Whether I sit or lie  
My empty mosquito net  
Is too large  
-Ukihashi (late 17<sup>th</sup> century)*

If I wrote a poem to you  
You would still be long dead and  
People would ask "Why her,  
And not the beauty Ono no Komachi  
Who wishes she were still dreaming?"

Writing of mosquito nets and great emptiness

A courtesan born too soon in this floating world

Your scant words nearly mistaken as another's  
Because of their beauty

How can they still ask me why?

Pen 3 tales or so.  
*Sword*

I.

“To study the soul, study the sword  
An evil soul, a evil sword,” the old men warn  
from the dim theaters of the glittering Ginza.

How different, the pen?  
Those who follow it, the dangerous:  
Dreamers of stroke  
And spirit.

When they end a matter, it is \_\_\_\_\_

II.

November.  
Grandma’s poetry discovered in an uncle’s box bottom.  
Read aloud after twenty years, she’s back at our table. Rhyme. Dream.  
For a moment, a comfort like a warm cup of coffee,  
What’s left of a carved turkey and a plate of cold cranberries.

III.

Some poets we barely name aloud.  
We’ve no words to mention them without a fight.

Better a song of the cicadas or wonder why the edge is always  
windy  
Than certain summer lights burning within some ‘since then’  
Who view their nephew’s cap askew.

We can revive chũ nôm and laugh over a quaint ca dao.  
Who contests a tanka, a writhing line of kanshi, a sassy sestina  
Or a smoldering ghazal as a harbor of the enemy.

But those who prod the waves against my burning home,  
Can I welcome them, no matter how prosperous my road became?  
There are consequences for even an inch of ink, or else words fail, surely?

The pen heals. Preserves. Remembers. Forgives in time, by necessity.  
But time won't be rushed for either small souls or legends, the grass or  
the trees.

## *Kobe Hotel*

Poor Saito, sitting in Kobe  
in that run-down hotel.  
After everything,  
your \$13 book  
is going for 99 cents.  
It was the sex and politics  
that did you in, they'll say.

I ran into our friend Shuntaro,  
who, between verses,  
had been spending his time  
translating Snoopy for  
the residents of Tokyo.

Writing from  
a scratched up table  
in O'Gara's

I wonder what he'll do with  
his free time

Now that Sparky is gone.

The streets of St. Paul  
are cluttered with plastic Peanuts pals  
by people who suddenly found  
a renewed appreciation  
for their memories of  
warm puppies  
Woodstock  
and good men.

There should be a haiku in there somewhere,  
but sometimes, a haiku can't solve everything.



## *Kanshi*

Now, what good was the Empress' brocade  
Or those laurel accolades  
Long since taken  
From your dusty bones  
That once laughed so much?

At 28, Kitano Gempo set his bristles and pipes aside  
Dripping with the unwritten  
In the name of zen  
And now he and his students won't be coming back again.

At 30 that rascal Saito finally found his voice,  
But nobody reads him if they can't find it in  
The bargain bins.

And in between  
At a fresh 29  
Where am i?

A corner of Frogtown  
In another Summer of my life  
Looking for words  
Like old Okubo Shibutsu  
Before the ice cream truck  
Returns in the streets below.

## *A Letter To Amida*

If you can follow  
My path  
To enlightenment  
Dear Amida,  
I'm not doing  
It right, so  
Please go away and  
Help some foxes.

*Dreams From A Cell*

Do you see the road by the rose  
Or the rose by the road?  
Foolish little butterfly!  
Leave it where you found it  
If you don't want to come back  
Next spring

Like a rascally  
Steve McQueen character,  
Cool-eyed and chained,  
Unrepentant as mud  
On Devil's Island

Or some kindhearted monk  
With a rain-soaked girl on his shoulders  
Rushing across a creaking bridge

Before the Chrysanthemum Festival begins

*Kawaii*

Mad master Muramasa at his forge  
Made blades to bite the Tokugawas  
From beyond the grave  
Before poor Ieyasu was born.

“What a spirit it took!” I said at my desk.

Alas, in contrast,  
my pencil can not kiss you  
in even this brief lifetime.

## *Dreaming*

When the dream ends it seems  
I've forgotten half of the things  
I said I'd remember.  
Thank God it's nothing like real life.  
But I'm always in a bustling city where  
I'm doing something more diverting  
Than the dreary toil of yesterday and prior.  
And there, I never seem to make mistakes  
Or at least, I don't notice  
And no one  
(Not even the little gnomes and kappas)  
Calls me on it.  
I wish I could tell you the words  
I'd said that once seemed so profound  
Between 1 and 3  
Amid the Tiger Kings  
And their dying courts  
To defend myself

But all I remember  
Is a broken promise  
Made in color

## *Schrödinger Zen*

My pen,  
the brushstroke,  
the swordstroke  
(mightier than)  
-ikebana  
-tea ceremonies  
-my lie,  
connected in  
a free form dot to dot  
gone rigid with commitment  
contained like a cat in a deadly black box

*A Tanka for Murasaki Shikibu*

A part of me prays  
The author of Genji's tale  
Will be the answer  
To become a millionaire,  
But I just don't play those games

### *Iai*

One steel flash  
drawn, sheathed,  
a life gone  
Like a shadow in the streets at noon.  
What difference was made?  
How foolish to ask.  
Yet some days, I envy the buffoon.

### *Nitenichi*

Ganryu and his laundry pole  
Died by a bokken blow  
And changed a kenshi's heart.  
A hair closer and there would have been  
No book of five rings



*That was Zen, This is Tao*

Big Wheel, little wheel, You all missed the point!  
Who needs names, who needs excuses?  
He found enlightenment in a drumbeat,  
She with an iron in the face,  
Watching the moon, losing a finger  
Reading a letter, incompleting a poem,  
Do you see the pattern?  
Then you are a fool.  
The Teachers are worse than the masters.  
And I, having written this poem,  
Have told you nothing.

## *Enso*

*"Does a computer have Buddha Nature?"*

Dogen drew a circle that  
Didn't connect.  
Instant enlightenment?

Like a microwave soup  
Spinning around and around  
In a Styrofoam cup,  
I've been thinking about  
That unfinished circle for years.

Sensei, it's just not the same  
As a dripping Shodo brush  
To use a Photoshop circle,

But brushes are expensive.  
Ink is hard to come by.

Like that wandering dog  
Who followed cynical  
Diogenes  
In the sun,

I have to work with the moments I have.

## *Warhammer*

The boy in the bookstore corner  
Browses a book of war

Sanguine gore, chattering apparati  
Cumulus clouds of dusty pandemonium  
Shriek smoke, terror stacks  
And measurements by megadeaths

This is man versus the alien  
The Stranger

Horde of chaos  
Occupant of contested space

To be so lonely

To be so savage

I, regarding an ethereal volume  
Of my former enemy's overpriced verses  
A wreath of reconciliation over lost dreams

Like a distant Martian mercenary  
Beside him,

I remember when I  
Read books like that,

A wraith

## *Building A Library*

At times I think of having a child  
So I can have my language back again.  
So I can recapture a thousand prodigal  
aggregates of thought.

Whether I gain a girl or a boy is irrelevant,  
although I think I might not want a hermaphrodite,  
as unenlightened as that may sound.

I contemplate the inevitable tug of war  
between my partner and I  
to divine some fitting name like Odin plucking runes  
or Adam naming things.

I stare at my bookshelf and wonder with what to fill the spaces  
in the best interests of the child  
whose head is still a holy tabula rasa.

I raise my arms and go abracadabra, trying to invoke  
my father's memory and the first books I laid my eyes on,  
now molding in the attic, outdated,  
yet still my grand foundation.

Perusing the modern bookstore, it's become clear.  
My old companions?

Supplanted, their glossy replacements  
unfamiliar and pricey,  
whom I cannot help but maintain  
a certain resentful suspicion.

I consider making my own library from  
scratch and hunt and peck:

A bestiary of things true, antiqued and rumored.

A catalog of seeds and their ancestors.

A history of the world riddled with holy texts  
and rational formulas fighting for the human soul.

A chronicle of day and night swaddled in wind, in rain.

A codex of anatomy and architecture  
with a pop-up picture of the future,  
frightfully cubist and compressed.

As my wife enters, appraising my blueprints, she tsks, and says:  
Weren't you just going to build  
a secret ninja training compound instead?

Sheepishly, I wonder  
If that idea wouldn't be easier,  
although good sense is expensive these days.

## *The Watermelon*

half eaten,  
this severed skull  
once grew full and round  
in a field I can barely imagine,  
a plump green tiger head by the curling vine

Now at midnight,  
the scent of my neighbor's marijuana  
heavy in the air,

I'm staring at what remains  
on my Frigidaire's shelf:

seeds dark and hard constellations,  
flesh sweet and moist.

I do not dare compare it to anything else,  
ready to take a black-handled knife  
to this thick shell  
and finish this business like a butcher  
at the edge of the city.

My mouth is becoming a lake,  
restless, ready to swallow a continent  
one shoreline at a time.

I wonder if he still hopes  
with what little is left

to keep growing,

filled with memories of the caring farmhands  
who cradled him,

waiting to pass these stories  
on to his own children.

I close the door, empty-handed,  
my belly filled with chaos...

## *Kingdoms*

Purple as  
Crushed shellfish

Life expectancy,  
That bruised question of finite measures.

Every hammered crown  
Is removed some way.

Scepters with their strange rotations  
Hold no true sway over the inner natures

Of manatee, mechanics  
Or magma with her radial flow.

Inspired robes unravel every hour  
For gifted maggots and their maws

Who roll in the smoky valleys  
Once our fathers' holy mountains.

The Asia you know is murder  
On monarchies.

American democracy is far safer  
For two-legged mosquitoes.

There, competition rarely ends in graves  
For anyone but foreigners,

Distant and near.



### *Thread Between Stone.*

Those old Greeks.

They punctured time with their stories, stitching  
Century to century

And I did not see this until 3 A.M. naturally.

I was raised on their tales pebble by pebble

Like Aesop's thirsty fox-

A scholar in the wake of semiotics and systems theory  
So irrelevant when children were master snipers  
For secret wars on the Plain of Jars and Afghan mountains.  
Times when the only teachers that mattered in Kosovo  
Were mercenaries.

If you stare at the labyrinth long enough, you'll see  
Arrogant Arachne's thread, used secretly by Gordius  
Until ambitious Alexander cut that silly knot in two  
With a sword as sharp as Ockham's.

As your eyes grow bleary from musty notes, after a time,  
You will connect those pieces to Ariadne,  
And the trap laid for old Dedaelus,  
Father of Icarus and Minotaur lairs.

One threads the maze with a lover to defeat the furious beast  
While the other threads spiral shells with an ant and a string-  
A beast to defeat an irate patron's riddle!

The legends are filled with strange ties like that.  
It's almost Buddhist in its circular irony.

Poor Oedipus never saw how he was tripped up by his puzzle,  
And scholars  
Never noticed he got it only half-right. Half-wrong.

The Sphinxian dilemma was no empty koan.

"What has four legs at morning, two at noon, and three at sunset?  
What is the weakest when it has the most support?"

Man, the children chirp. Man was the answer that made him king.

No.

The question was one of self-knowledge,  
And the only true response was "I".

But he could not see himself within the riddle,  
So he returned to home, to dark fates decreed,  
Undone by his blindness to his own identity.

That's what you get for cheating with the Oracle.  
There are no shortcuts with Destiny.

The Greeks laid traps like this that took centuries to spring.  
The whole Trojan war was a conflict of divine metaphors.

If that lusty prince had chosen between  
Wisdom or the peaceful hearth  
And not the promise of fleeting beauties,  
A thousand men might have  
Different graves.

Today, in the heart of Western democracy,  
As presidents chase interns  
With their own oral traditions,

It's hard not to wince at unlearned lessons.  
And gazing at Egypt,  
Beneath the pyramids of Giza and great royal valleys

There is a world  
Oblivious to all of my mythic meanderings.

Scorched and bleached to epic simplicity,  
You will never understand the dreams of mummies  
Until you see a silkworm cocoon

Who aspires to emerge as a butterfly in her next incarnation  
Before someone unravels her for her thread.

## *Carbon*

Although the body is 70% water  
What remains is built upon carbon.

I stand awed by the orbits of these dark atoms:  
    The infinite flavors they form  
    The varied hues and sounds  
    The motions they generate

Erecting cities, razing mountains  
Feeding upon everything certain.

    They even dream, whether fashioned  
    Into butterflies or soft humans.

Why don't I taste like my distant cousin the chicken  
Or a banana?

Pressing my hands hard together, I fail to change into  
Diamonds or oil.

    I suppose it's not enough pressure  
    To spark transformation.

    Not even into a new star burning brightly,  
    The sun for billions

    Who will never realize how close they came  
    To being in my shoes.

*Moments In The Eye*

Among those we see

Those most intriguing  
Hint  
Of her soul  
When cameras aren't flashing

It's like glimpsing a glittering carp  
Seconds before she changes

Into something truly immortal  
Human tongues lack words for,

Dashing away with a laugh  
And a playful splash

To cheer the living

*Pavlov's Menagerie Ruminates*

Well, better this than life

In an electrified rat cage,  
Hugging Harlow's wire mothers,  
Getting stuffed in Schrödinger's lethal boxes  
Or getting launched into low orbit

To bathe in cosmic rays for the Kremlin  
Because I couldn't sign fast enough  
Or cuddle a kitten in front of a camera.

Navigating the thin-walled maze  
Between best friend  
Or mad moments like Cujo

I've still got most of my original equipment.  
I'm fed.

One ring, and my belly goes hollow  
As the average human soul.

Lately, I gnaw on memories more than substance  
But I'm still not a sheep,

And no one begs for my vote.

## *Zelkova Tree*

A friend warned me the other day  
Not to write about the zelkova

Or I might come back as one  
And find myself cut into furniture

Just as things start to get interesting.

The other day the zelkova warned me  
Not to worry about my friends

Or I might stay human

And find myself cutting furniture  
Just as things start to get interesting.

## *Whorl*

Today, a poet died  
Because he lost all of his questions.

Somewhere in France, a tire exploded,  
Delaying a young girl's tour.  
She's burst tears,  
Caving around a fistful of euros  
As she senses lost moments

Just over the next hill  
Floating, a red balloon.

There she imagines Joan of Arc,  
A bicycle thief and Jacques Cousteau.

A street that's been there  
For centuries.

Elsewhere, a little boy becomes an artist  
As he sniffs his first jar of tempera  
Handed out by a young teacher from Hokkaido  
Unaware of the seventy two tubes of oil paint  
He will use in his entire lifetime.

Today, I'm waving at a crow in Como Park  
As if my hands were semaphore flags  
Signaling "Hello," like a transient grey alien

Wondering what a bird has to do to become  
Reincarnated as a writer the next time around.

Yesterday, a girl I knew changed her hair color  
Insisting it made a difference, handing me  
An antique birdcage she found in the street



Its curved door broken off, a rusty smile for  
Curious dogs who don't know what to make of it,  
Howling in a Frogtown alley devoid of poetry.

*Here, the River Haunt.*

Bodies of students young despair:  
An artist, the whispered, teeth and hair.  
Some spectral digits clasp at flags and tear.  
Yon wave and pavement witness near  
Your campus of dreams, the shade and clear  
To see such windy seas our clashing forms are from,  
Fathom foam and phantom, our eerie erring ear.

What unwise winding butcher Time will cease and pare, without peer.

## *Anger*

Coiling within, this? Not the face I would show you.  
The roar beneath wires, the roar hushed by white noise  
Blanketing the land.

Shadows, night's exiles: "Go fugitive in the streets."

Skylines punctuate sentences of geography with  
Incessant luminescence.  
Our world is aglow. There is no time  
When all of the citizens of our city

Are asleep at once anymore.

I learned to despise without passion.  
I rear up, a dragon.  
I open my jaw, a tiger defending the last hour men drink.

I cleave open the heart of my lovers that I may rest in them,  
Nestled against the storm.

My dispositions:  
Collated.  
Codified response, taking flight through banks  
Of predictable information for the sake of cool conformity,  
Instead of soaring

Across landscapes wired solely by  
Rivers and the silence.

*Today's Special at the Shuang Cheng*

Coated in caramelized spice:  
The suckers of a squid tentacle  
diced into impotence  
between my chopsticks  
and baked.

They once clutched  
at an ocean  
writhing with life,  
clasping dearly to each precious bite.

What will worms use  
to hold my bony hands  
if I don't let my family  
throw me into the  
sea ,

a handful of dust  
with a hint of squid flavoring.

## *Still Life*

It's a grave thing.  
Absent the living.  
Objects arrayed.  
Pose in light and shade,  
Suggest meaning for the animate remaining.

Here a painting,  
A sketch or a garden of stones,  
A quenched flame,  
A planet on the last day of all beings  
Now silent, no more transforming

Amid the novas and nebulae.

With finality,  
Every human to earth returns.

Free.

Creatures of plots.

## *Fieldcraft*

Don't wear pistols on the field.  
They'll think you're in charge,  
Sniper bait.

Don't stand by the sucker  
Strapped to the radio.  
The guy calling for help

Is always trouble,  
Bringing his buddies and  
Beaucoup Boom Boom.

Hence, he's a real lead magnet,  
As bad as it gets.

Go ahead and take point.  
They want the guys behind you,  
Chatting in the jungle with  
Their bad aftershave

Giving them away like candy at the carnival,  
Loud as a half-filled olive green canteen  
Of stale water writhing with liver flukes.

Duck and cover  
When the skies fill with nukes.  
Don't breathe too hard if you get a whiff of  
Something funky in the air like Satan's Tang.

Don't scream. Don't run. Watch your step at all times.  
A mine could be anywhere,  
Or you could die impaled like a vampire  
On some bamboo skewer

For a minor hill  
That doesn't get a name  
Only a number.

## *The Shape*

What is the shape of the wise man?  
Is it the unblinking eye or the open hand?  
Is it the restless foot or the compassionate heart?  
Is it a book of prayers or a moment of silence?

Is it a wild horse in the fields of Shangri La  
Or a bolt of lightning over Angkor Wat?

Is it that fragile water lily in a pond in Luang Prabang  
Or the croaking frog in a Mississippi mudslide  
Gone now, without a trace.

No one says it is an unsheathed sword.  
Few would argue for a cracked atomic mushroom  
Boiling an ocean of sharp-toothed sharks to prove an equation.

Uncertain judgment should be noted  
Regarding tiny infants on University Avenue  
Or humble ants packing their ditty bags  
At the first hint of a cloud of RAID coming their way.

And it is almost certainly never found in a mirror.



## *A Question of Place*

Poseidon digs a grave for me in the side  
Of beleaguered Gaia:

Trench wide, ocean deep, a hole calling  
From beneath his cold, stoic waves.

Ambitiously he makes ready,  
Gazing at the teeming shores of man

As though there is not space enough upon the earth  
For this sort of thing.

The Ocean Lord does not realize the methods of disposal  
Are as myriad as the erosions.

Even with feet pierced at birth,  
Oedipus could not resist the call to a home  
He never recognized.

The son is tied to fate, to soil, to heart, to grave.

What home is this, that people want?  
To be born where the final comfort is served.

In exasperation, hearts gasp for the complexity of ants.

Surely ants don't ask such riddles of themselves,  
Even those night travelers upon the beach

Swept away by Poseidon's mischief,  
Trying to return beneath the hill of their own making.

## *Tetragrammaton*

Among the monotheists: We are children of the Word,  
From the very first second in which light came to Be,  
Before a witness was, a single eye blinked.

A mystic in New York will tell you:  
He believes in the 72-syllable secret name of God,  
Even more than the genome we spent half his lifetime collating.

"God is certain, chemicals are not," he says confidently,  
His shallow face lit by a thin scented candle from India,  
His great wall of used books behind him filled with unread passages.

In September in the basement of Qwest's center:  
Young Khadra confirms for me  
She knows all of the sacred names of Allah and still believes

As our world crashes.  
Her faith, unfashionable, my words, so small.

We, laid off in October:  
Barely warning or fanfare  
While Russians remember  
Their Great Revolution for Red Square.

Only a handful still revere the State's blushing face  
Twisting on giant banners in the cold Muscovite wind.

"My name means 'Green'" Khadra says, waiting for our bus one last time.  
"And it's true, I come from a nation of poets. Is yours such a place?"

I do not know how to reply, distracted. Thinking  
How hard it was, to imagine

That single perfect word by which a universe might be made,

Watching a nearby wild flower and a monarch butterfly  
Who both seem so free without these questions:  
Destined to die with the first winter frost

But still enjoying their time together.

## *To an Old Tune*

I didn't start a poet.  
Did all to stall it.  
Called it a hobby, a summer cloud,  
An Iowa rainbow.

It's water in a floating world  
Crammed with people who are  
Secretly 3/4ths ocean wave and  
1/4th black stardust.

What I really wanted to be is  
Too embarrassing to tell,  
But if I go to hell now,  
It's what I'll be doing  
For the rest of my afterlife.

## *Mythologies*

Donna means woman.  
Bella means beautiful.  
The two together are a deadly poison,  
The kissing cousin of nightshade.

Elsewhere, sure as hemlock for  
The throats of sages in their curious passage,  
Corrupting the freest

### The Void

Howls, a white wolf for your bones,  
Who hopes to make soup for the devil  
Beside the river stones

Like curveless Pandora for her Titan  
Lurking by the curling vine.

## *A Hmong Goodbye*

I'm playing Scrabble  
At the funeral on English Street  
With idle children

Who already know: Death  
Took forever out here.  
Meanwhile, the old men of St. Paul

Curse each other's shifting fortunes  
In their coarse card games  
As forty ounce bottles slowly

Slide down throats to swollen bellies  
The hue of amber and rice.

Tears are reserved for the women  
In the next room among suspended drums

And droning horns of bamboo and gourd  
Singing a dry roadmap to the next world.

Incense, hairspray and perfume  
Permeate the waxy parlor

While a young boy wonders if it is true  
You need special shoes when walking  
Over the Land of Fuzzy Caterpillars towards Heaven  
With a split soul.

My opponents look up accusingly,  
Scattering tiles to every corner,  
Running off to play  
Other games instead,

Minute mouths mocking  
The word EXTINCT,

Pronouncing it fraud.

## *A Vision of Invasion*

Someday I expect  
Egypt will launch

A surprise attack  
And pry the hands off Big Ben.

Whisk away the antenna of the Eiffel Tower  
And carry off the rubble of the House of Commons.

Students of archaeology will travel from far abroad  
To witness a history reclaimed and preserved

Beneath an unflinching sun  
While Euromania sweeps the country

And bad copies of Spice Girl photos are sold to decorate tacky homes.  
Oh, what do you care, poet?

They don't even bother trying to preserve your heart.  
My poems must serve as my canopic jars.



## *Wight*

Long the nail iron in  
What's cleft from time, the body seasoning.  
Clamber, clatter, silence seeker.

Reek of all the morrows who round us ring!

I know well both sides our craven slab  
So lustily devouring  
We clay scrabbles, we clawed things.

Tombs are my books.  
Bones are my poems.  
Skin my page.  
Breath, my ink  
Read like blood, my essential kin.  
Yesterday, my many spines.

The rags? Nothings after all.

## *My Autopsy, Thank You*

In the hollows of my chest  
Between my heart and other assorted pieces of viscera,  
Was there ever really enough room for my soul?

When the scalpels plunge into me,  
Dancing between veins and arteries and bone,  
Will the surgeons laugh, or speak in monotone?

Am I just my flesh,  
A chemical soup or a sausage sack?

Is my soul everything between the spaces of my vitals,  
Or is it these things too? Or none of the above?

Please doctor, as you poke and pry,  
If you should find any answers for me,

Whisper them in what's left of my ears  
Or carve them next to: RETURN TO SENDER

With my name attached,

Using your stainless steel razor sharp letter openers.  
Feel free to rummage through and push aside  
Whatever's in the way.

As for the fluids that I drip on you,  
I can't help it anymore.

I'd say I'm sorry, but how can I,

If my fears and loves and cares were trapped inside

This mortal heart,  
When it was blown out of the cavity of my chest

Into the streets for strangers to slip in?

## *Poultry*

Scrawny daughters of dinosaurs,  
Your lovers never shut up—  
Preening in streets lined with black feathers

As if every hour is the start of a new day,  
And the sun won't ascend without them.

Beneath your bamboo domes  
I see every soft throat with its  
Destiny of edge and demise.

You're in hot water,  
Losing every frantic thread  
That failed your sad quests for flight.

Your legs stiffen without eulogies,  
And your wings can't pray their petitions  
To the god of the Archaeopteryx for delivery.

Arriving in St. Paul, immigration asks me  
If I've been in contact with livestock.

I want to say: "Are you kidding?  
Have you ever even been to my homeland?"

Looking out to the rising sun my breakfast  
Will never see again.

## *Preguntas*

If Neruda asks  
This cloudy question  
He is a poet, undisputed

A noble master of letters

When these words pass through  
A Zen abbot's lips  
We hear a cryptic koan, impossible

A riddle to defy attachment

If lustrous Hồ Xuân Hương idly toys  
With this conundrum upon  
Her pliant ink-stained lap, inscrutable

She becomes an oral tradition  
For romantic schoolboys in old Saigon

Should I dare repeat  
Any of this aloud while still alive,  
I am a fool to be buried in the cold grooves  
Of Saint Cloud.

Now, how fair is that?

*What Tomorrow Takes Away*

On a good day,  
The feeling of  
Something left undone,  
Nagging like Mrs. Tolstoy  
On your deathbed in Astapovo.

On a bad day,  
The feeling that  
Something has been  
Accomplished  
Like Mr. Tolstoy's last period  
For a book called War and Peace.

I wish we weren't so obsessed with hope.  
Because in a good world,  
We wouldn't need it at all.

## *The Hymn of Stones*

Learn something true of the world  
And you'll never want.

Others will foist and prod,  
Chafe and stamp, object.

Hold it within, it becomes a treasure,  
Your tomb.

Share it, and your hands become empty.  
You truly live.

Learn of the world's wants  
And you'll become some thing of nevers:

Want to learn of the world?  
Some things are never you.  
You are things some never learn.

At the summit only empty hands are found.  
But the minds are palaces.  
The voices become nations.

*XXII*

Who depended  
Upon

An Asian  
Barrow

Nearby

Strays  
Beneath an aimless star



## *Vocabularies*

I look at florid Xue Di  
thinking of words I stopped using.

Gone, departed: bleak and stagnant streams,  
grown limpid with moss and dying memories  
of Nineveh and Nihilism.

Blasted into the oblivion of the unused page:  
stoic reflections on Marcus Aurelius  
and Cappuccino monks.

Dreaded Mahakala no longer comes in like the Kali Yuga  
to plunge his timeless hands into my heart  
to fuel the cryptic mandalas and labyrinths I once  
understood so well.

I can't buy a cup of coffee from the Starbucks mermaid  
with even half of my latter verses  
and a dollar in change.

Where is: my poem to commemorate the Dalai Lama's visit,  
when a decade ago, I fought like that Persian lion Rustam to see him?

When was the last time I spoke of arhats and boddhisatva vows?

Melancholy creeps over me like a giant kudzu.

I'm rotting from compromise on the vine,  
and if I don't turn it around,  
I'll be an unexploded raisin  
or pressed into some unsavory vintage  
stored in the distended corner of some discount cellar.

But as I open the papers to the limbless youths of Iraq

and broken buddhas on the Afghan plains  
it's hard to take writer's block seriously.

What is a lost word to a boy without a hand?

What does a missing sentence mean  
to the condemned man in Congo who will die without even  
a last meal?

Despair over a dearth of words is despicable.

To be wrapped up in semantics while semi-automatics chew apart  
the youth in the heart of our cities is ... well, I've lost the word.

But I have no right to lament, and lift my pen to write again...

## *Chartreuse*

The color of the flamethrower  
Is different from the flame

On a blazing bamboo hut  
Or a charring Iraqi conscript

Who's been caught on camera  
But deemed unfit for television

Lest public opinion get peeled down  
Like a yellow onion on the cutting board.

A housewife from Humboldt Avenue stops into  
The Shuang Cheng with her friend who loves  
The scarlet lobster smothered in ginger

Marveling at the incredible array of colors  
That are available today

Praising the technicians of beauty  
Who paint new souls on for a pittance

Isn't it a scream, she says.  
Isn't it a scream.

Outside, it has begun to snow.  
And the tiny poets of the world declare it

The fingerprints of God.

## *Homunculus*

We always want to make  
Little men, playing around  
In the kitchens of the gods  
We made and prayed to

When midnight lightning  
Could not be expressed  
As a mere one plus one equation  
To the Children of Oceans.

Their heirs, the Turning Wheels,  
Today give snide smiles  
To antique alchemy in  
Favor of the clones we pray  
Will surpass their aging mold,

A step short of immortal,  
As righteous as the Zero.

## *Genesis 2020*

The new ark shall be compact  
The size of a Gucci suitcase:  
A thousand microvials brimming  
With an incriminating sampling of our genetic meandering  
Since the tree of life was a sapling.

Like a magician's trick unfolded,  
A babbling ocean now stares  
As the genie is put back into the bottle,  
On the rocks, into the waves.

A hermetic voyager  
Singing a Homeric ode  
Across time's elliptical odyssey.

At least until the battery  
Wears out...

### *The Dancer Introduces One of His Aspects*

I am Shiva, I am Kali,  
I am the bird you never see.

With riddles infested full of dreams,  
I am the corpse that pollutes the stream.

I am the angel, soot-eyed with breath of pitch.  
I am your hound, found by the ditch.

I am the bait of a child, hanging in the glooms.  
I am the memory of She, interred in the tomb.

My hands are the coiling tendrils of a drying jade vine,  
My feet are the fires doused by the vagrant's wine.

My heart is the wheel, breaking the road.  
My kiss and my spit, the gifts of my lips, the precious abode.

My ribs are the spars from which flowers grow,  
My bones are the tethers the sages know.

My eyes are the conquerors who ride through the night,  
My howl, the laughter of children born anew out of sight

Plunged down as a pavement for my eternal act.  
You try to flee?

I am the dancer, I am the city.

## *Labyrinth*

After so many years  
And all my tears I've shed,  
This, at last:

After so many years  
Pent up in my Maze of head and paste,  
I can now say it's all "past".

After so many years  
Freely clear, by my own hand,  
I once more gaze upon the Sun.

After so many years  
My cost: my wife, my job,  
My only son.

After so many years  
My prison I've made,  
Simple dust.

After so many years  
I can return to what I've missed  
So long, and rebuild my prisons anew.

My only art that I can trust.

## *Metropolis*

The architecture of identity is composed  
Of the mortars of deed, time and space.

A man is rarely a cathedral, but surely  
More than a mean hovel of mud.

If bricks are the consequences of action  
We have the material for the Pyramid of Cheops.

Are these walls, however elaborate,  
Made to invite us in or keep us out?

The first barbarian at the Great Wall of China  
Was immortalized by Larson in the Far Side;  
What of those who encounter our impregnable edifice?

Shall they discover we are only a walking Maginot,  
Or the Kabba at the Dhu-L-Hijjah in all its sublime simplicity?

What dervish shall dance with the sensei  
In the shadows of our being, glimpsing  
The terror of the Architect as the foundations  
Begin to creak? What hand shall dare to grip the ladder  
To ascend and peer through the windowpanes to the center  
Of our labyrinths?

Boxed and packaged within walls  
We are a city, you and I.  
The skylines of the world.

We are the children of the Architect  
Seduced too often to believe ourselves  
Too frail to attain the age of landmarks



Collapsing as a matter of principle, more  
Than necessity,

Urban renewal in an  
Age of empty buildings barred to the homeless.

## Riding the 16

Forty-five minutes  
is enough time to write  
a small book of poems  
but they never seem to come  
until you're furthest away from a pen.

It must be the rhythm of the skyline:

The faces of strangers grow more familiar  
yet quiet as a Somalian maiden at 9 A.M.

A Russian tea house has gone out of business.

A carniceria is offering fresh meat  
while Xieng Khouang and Saigon become neighbors  
once more, amid falling borders and empty buildings  
for the American dreamers.

Porky's holds onto cold war prosperity and  
dine-in-your-car sensibilities, a neon blaze at night.

The Hong Kong Noodle House has flourished since the handover.

An old German photographer laughs with me about the noise  
of a Minolta at the ballet and the fall of civilization to Y2K.

He's showing me a book about comedy left at the previous stop,  
chuckling at strange fortunes, quantum physics and  
the clocks dotting our way.

I don't catch his name, trundling off at my stop,  
wondering how people find poetry without the bus.

*To the Pet Shop Gecko*

Behind the glass,  
You haven't the song

To make young girls free you.  
You're no covert prince after a kiss

And you won't take flight  
Like an ugly duckling.

Over a wise pig's brick house.  
Sticking pitifully to this tank,

Sometimes I wish you could blink  
A Morse message to Heaven

Where your silver cousins play in the  
Stellar furnaces of the Dragon King.

But for now all we get is your quiet instrumental  
Edited for television

Between episodes of American Idol  
And Just Shoot Me

## *Modern Life*

With its happy hours and high rises  
Is hard to capture:  
It's a glimpse from a paused bus  
Of a classic car  
Sparkling impatiently  
At a red stoplight, itching  
To roar off to Porky's  
In the Spring  
While young Hmong boys  
Parked in a grimy Lexington lot  
Rev their thundering import engines for  
Slender brown-eyed girls slinking around  
In so-sexy Frankenstein heels  
Waiting for the cops in their fancy cruisers  
To blink

So our race can begin

## *Perspectives*

The fly.  
Perched upon my computer monitor,  
She stares.

The computer monitor  
only glares.

One sees me with a thousand facets  
The other,  
Only as a reflection of 1s and 0s.

I'm still not certain which disturbs me more.

## Sprawl

Sexy as the flesh warm against the grey  
We exhale, touching true earth  
Typically by 24 inches at a time  
Except when sleeping.

Our forms half rain, half mud, half heat of day,  
Half cold of night.

We're all bundled tube, incomplete orifice,  
We stuff, we ram, we chew

Discontent with hollow.

There's life at stake for  
Sausage City. So we don't  
stop for much.

So rarely as one, as mob  
We are our rubbing cells

Needing more, but not much more.  
Distrusting excess mass presence over  
Suspect intimacy.

Grimy, vein and solid, soft  
Groping together before suns expire

Our mouths open as city gates,  
Smooth roads lined in wet red carpet.

## *The Big G.*

We don't say his name aloud in serious poetry.  
We close our eyes and say he doesn't exist.  
I am a modern eastern Peter with a mouth of denials  
While the cocks crow at the rising sun.

Right next to a certain master of Jeet Kune Do,  
He stood like a giant torii gate  
Between my heart and the American flag.

How many people were surprised, when my words  
Moved in time with my lips.

Even today, they still believe my buildings  
Can't stand the test of time, crumbling  
At the first sign of trouble  
Like a pasty French defense  
Only a swarthy legion of strangers can vindicate.

But the old boy's got stamina-  
He's neck and neck with James Bond,  
Trampling the Police Academies and Shakespeare plays.

Now, why should I reject this reliable radioactive lug,  
Just to be taken seriously by some stiff academe  
With erectile dysfunction and a bad toupee?

And in learning to love the reptile,  
Perhaps we can learn to love ourselves,  
Atomic halitosis and all.

## *Cobra*

The more I think about it  
The more I think

I'm going to name my first  
Girl Cobra

Just to see how many  
Will rush to kiss her

Expecting a belladonna flower  
To explode in their mouth

Like a yellow cluster bomb  
Everyone thought

Was a dud.

That's paternal instinct for you.  
But I suspect I'm going to be  
Overridden

By her mother,  
Who loves all beautiful things.



## 2019 Blues

Home again?  
Ho. Me? A gain.  
Jiggety jig.

“Good evening!”

To market, to market,

<< Commerce. That’s our goal. Here. >>

To buy a fat hog,

“More Human  
Than Human.”

Home a gain.

*If only you could see...*

Ho: Me again...

<<You’ve done a man’s job.>>

Jiggety Jog.

I. Guess. You’re through, huh?

■ was not called ‘execution,’ it was ■ ‘retirement.’

You’re little, people<sup>1</sup>

1: La gente paga, e rider vuole qua.  
Ridi, Pagliaccio, e ognun applaudirà!  
La Commedia è Finita!

}

From 1838 to 1841  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
Was Pig’s Eye.

From various suspect traditions:

A Hmong shaman in the 20<sup>th</sup> century requested a pig’s jaw.

Chinese and Italians? Rumored to eat every part of a pig but the squeal.

Tonight, it rained. No one could stop it, especially not a poor beat cop.

*Legion*

Our true names?

Power.

Possession,

Our aim.

So many means to read this.

Foreign. American. Demon.

Swine before a pearl-filled sea?

We die. For many reasons.

Good book, Equality,

Liberty, Fraternity,

Out of many, one.

We yearn to be free.

This, our unity.

*Zhū Bājiè*

Tian Peng Yuan Shuai was  
The honored Grand Admiral of 800,000,  
Marshall of the Heavenly River.

Under his proud hand,  
The enemies of the empire met doom by sea,  
Sinking beyond eye and history, or dying in mud, forgotten mayflies.  
To each their duty. Names for the victorious only.

What his foes fought and died for, their societies of tools and song,  
Could be of no concern. Only tomorrow and blood, blade and command.

For centuries there were no Chinese autobiographies.  
Only their commentaries on the words of war and state  
Applied.

Paper and ink were holy here.

All he truly saw, lost in the bureaucracy of testimonies.  
During his final peach banquet among the heavens, Chang'e,  
Goddess of the moon,  
Was a beauteous guest before the splendors he preserved.

Who would not be a fool before her?  
Who would not risk all for her attentions?

To her, he was just another drunken butcher the empress rebuked.

In apology, the admiral, abashed, resigned.  
To earth descending, to be a better legend.

Later on some savage isle,  
The Lord of the Flies makes a meal of a boar's head,

Knowing nothing of Tian Peng Yuan Shuai,  
The lives he ended or the lives he led.

One December morning,  
A poet waits for April in Minneapolis  
Thinking of a pretty girl, a moon, a pig.

## *Minotaur*

There is nothing behind the red silk cape of the matador.  
If you're looking for the man,  
Look to the side.

Charging furious, a raging coal  
Caught in the moment

For Spanish swordsmen  
Wrapped up in an inevitable scene

Switching places with his killer.

Something dies within him,  
Not knowing why

## *Reconsidering Gordian*

What have you done?

In a single stroke, what have you undone?

Brute Philistine, you were no Goliath  
But in a moment of pragmatic impatience...

Words fail.

For centuries I could not disprove you.

In a decade of troubled dreams,  
You still won, every time.

*I was a fool to pin a kingdom to a knot.*

I am a villain for the lesson I allow you to teach.

Just as well you never met the Sphinx,  
Drunkard.

## *My Autopsy, Thank You*

In the hollows of my chest  
Between my heart and other assorted pieces of viscera  
Was there every really enough room for my soul?  
When the scalpels plunge into me  
Dancing between veins and arteries and bone  
Will the surgeons laugh, or speak in monotone?  
Am I just my flesh,  
A chemical soup or a sausage sack?  
Is my soul everything between the spaces of my vitals  
Or is it these things too? Or none of the above?  
Please doctor, as you poke and pry  
If you should find any answers for me  
Whisper them in what's left of my ears  
Or carve them next to: RETURN TO SENDER  
With my name attached  
Using your stainless steel razor sharp letter openers.  
Feel free to rummage through and push aside  
Whatever's in the way.  
As for the fluids that I drip on you  
I can't help it anymore.  
I'd say I'm sorry, but how can I,  
If my fears and loves and cares were trapped inside  
This mortal heart

When it was blown out of the cavity of my chest  
Into the streets for strangers to slip in?

*For the Friend Who Will Never Read This*

Your hair,

a splash of ink on a pale page  
a bound loop of  
particolored thread  
for a paj ntaub  
laced with the scent of flowers  
I cannot name.

On an Autumn couch  
reading this  
after work  
you are a

soft brush laced with razors  
no one            about  
except me.

During work,  
I'm writing.



## *The Caves of Pak Ou*

Like the Island of Misfit Toys,  
Here reside

Three thousand broken Buddhas  
Hidden from the common view  
At the gorgeous mouth of the River Ou.

It's like visiting Les Invalides in Paris.  
You want to comfort them. Offer mercies.  
Speak of just causes and the daily news.

Assure them they're not yesterday's refuse.

That you were listening amid the incense,  
As bad a Buddhist as you are.

They rise to greet you from their cliffs of lime  
Like stone Lilliputians  
Or solemn Smurfs  
Warning of the perils  
Of attachment and fear.

Do they talk in the dark  
When we've all gone back home?

Do they mend their chipped robes  
With dust and dew,  
Or massage each other's weary soles  
Before the next day comes?

Do they wish they could blurt out warnings  
To the tourists to watch their steps in the shadows?

Do they remember how to giggle?

Do they ever just once wish  
They could switch places with us for a day?  
I heard of a man who snuck a Buddha  
Into his fancy silk pocket  
Like a dizzy girl from Shangri-La

And never saw his home again.

Climbing all over their house, I'm a child  
To these ancient icons,  
Who gently pray I'll never have to come back,

Just like they're supposed to.

## *The Crater*

Drop down this siege of flat and angle,  
Cup your hands as if hollering for  
The moon

Scooping out earth like ice cream  
For the children of the ironmongers

And too, their impatient hounds  
Slippery as moray eels  
After your bowls of sweet, sweet victory,  
Howling for more  
Bowels

You, wiggling your iron tail  
Curiously  
Like a  
carnival pinwheel,

Aren't you ashamed you don't even know  
The name of this place?

## *Libertree*

The tree of liberty devours the loyal  
Grinding them between burning flag teeth and a ton of open doors.  
Blue lakes formed in the footprints of Babe  
While the trail of tears formed a bloody river.

Washington had a thing for breaking cherry trees and raising hemp  
That was good for strong ropes to bind us all together  
In a frenetic world of neckties and necessities.

No one knows the names of Afghan heroes or Hmong veterans  
Whose fathers raised opium crops now littered with landmines.

Few can tell you where Russia is, even after fifty years  
Of cold wars in tropical nations they "never vacationed in, personally."  
They would be unable to tell you how many of our allies are  
In an impossible debt, negotiating a cost-effective betrayal.  
But they can tell you about "Friends" and Miss October.

Miscellaneous documents outlining  
Illiterate farmers with \$200 anti-tank weapons  
Have surfaced to air our missile mania,  
A culture where no one sees the irony  
Of naming a million-dollar cruise missile  
After a tomahawk, while defanged reservations cope  
With under-funded schools.

People laugh as immigrants report stories of American giants  
Who press you beneath their green thumbs stained with dollars  
When it's time to eat.

Cannibalized ideas and epics lay exhausted, scattered apple-seeds  
In urban canyons formed by alien policies of war and leverage.  
And a great love of sequels.  
Half of the nation has never seen an orchard,

Only the recycled city papers  
They are being ignored in as usual.

Somehow, the Cubans managed to preserve  
The purity of baseball and cigars  
While we still can't imagine the rules to Canadian curling,  
Despite our open borders.

And strangely, when a laughing yellow cab driver  
Who was a former engineer from Iraq tells me about  
US chemical weapons and acid rain,  
I'm just not as surprised as I wish I could be.

His last words rang like a cracked bell outside  
Of a smoking capitol of conspiracies:

"When there's a new war, watch.  
A refreshing new ethnic restaurant will open in your neighborhood  
Soon..."

## *Pastimes*

Unamerican football is the national sport of Laos.  
But they're open to other games, too,

From top wars on the smoking peaks near Saisombun  
To volleyball sets in Tai Dam villas.

The hopeful children know  
Their own version of roshambo  
And sepaktakraw,

Their limbs wild arcs and fire,  
Tiny tornadoes upon the green.

But it's difficult to get a satisfying game  
Of chess or dominoes out here anymore.

Golf will never catch on in riddled Phonsavan,  
And cross-country track and field games are  
Ill-advised. Especially with cleats.

Crosswords can be resolved but are rarely seen,  
While cryptograms fuel grave suspicions  
No matter how benign their modern code.

Hide and Seek seems particularly pointless  
In the blasted zones of disjoint and hole.

A novice monk named Boun Lom  
Is playing tic-tac-toe with me  
In the shade of his struggling wat,

Trying to get the upper hand,  
His humble zero in the center ever thwarted

In a game he doesn't suspect  
He can't win.

## *Lady Xoc*

Jesus marimba, lady, your noble rite  
Leaves me with nightmares.  
Jack the Ripper and Doctor Lecter  
Have nothing on your offers  
Of paper, blood and flame  
From your well-traveled tongue.

The taste of midnight thorns from  
Fragrant Yaxchilan shrubbery  
Are regal semaphore flags  
Fluttering for the coldest heavens.

Shield Jaguar with his raging torch covertly  
Averts his stony gaze from  
The barbed stingray tail dangling within  
Your delicate hands, struggling not to wince.

"It is the smoke," he mutters.  
To blanch: Unbecoming of a warrior king.

My department says I'm an ethnocentric brute  
Who understands nothing  
Of the demands of power among the Maya.

My American judgments have no place  
Amid your holy incantations, and I will be  
Ostracized like Socrates for suggesting

Our First Ladies should be grateful  
Things turned out this way  
And not the other.

But you have little to say about anything,



The curve of your stone lips cryptic as the maiden  
In Michelangelo's mirror, tied to a thread  
More painful than any Gordian knot.

*Everything Belongs to the Spider*

I  
have book lungs for your knives  
    I circle on the thinnest trap line  
Gaze eight times before brunch  
    Upon the desiccated casts I left behind

    Awaiting meals like  
An antsy kid for a campfire ghost...

Regrettably, this silky web  
    I wish would lasso      a rose-haired sunset

Snags  
only  
shriveled  
dried shades  
and pests  
each  
night.

    But it will be mine,  
someday.

## *Severances*

For your end we have so much blade  
To sever cord of dream and body.  
Harden an edge sufficiently. Clip.  
Be still.

One proper stroke. A lifetime. There.  
The rest awaits.

Sheer, the cliffs of old you scaled.  
Certain, we finite in our tasks, our days:  
Someday, none shall need of clothing.  
One day, we fates shall eye our own,

Our slender threads entwined  
With every story known.

Leveled without witness. Without peer.

## *Shuttle*

I bear a thread.

Here, I convey by certain route,  
My domain, my colorful road of cloth  
That might array a king or waif.  
My life is repetition, passing and binding.  
Warp and woof.

What arrives by shuttle  
May change your life  
Like a star you want to touch,

A robe of riddles you want to unravel,  
A yarn the age repeats for dreaming butterflies  
And a distant sound of thunder.

## *A Sum of Threads*

Lost stories abound, loitering like lusty mules,  
Ebullient commerce of buck, babe and gamble.

To lose is the gain of the unknown.  
Here,  
In the shadow of the good earth,

The whitest pearl is still a single hard grain.

I greet you, weaver between your thin red webs.  
When I'm not looking, I know, like a Harry Harlow monkey

You're secretly the wind of Texas,  
A lion in Chicago, a hungry oyster on rainy 9<sup>th</sup> and Hennepin  
Or a drowsy parrot in Saline of curious hue.

I want to take you home, kin, but we never know our place.

We laugh with light, high above the type

Oh, who swear, by their loud traditions and trajectories apparent  
"Connections can seal," a cad's roar with lips of misplaced baggage.

They hypnotize the sun like a Mississippi  
Rebus,  
A crow, no, a raven, no, a rook flapping to Pluto or some palace  
Nameless,

Victorious, a halo, a tramp pyre. Free. Transforming  
An answer waiting to be buried, rebelling, uncaging  
Defiant, you lovely want of mine.

Clothing me, a ray, a tapestry of dreamers, a flag adopted.

### *Tie: A Knot's Perspective*

To tie is to connect,  
To live as more than mere falling leaf  
Broke from branch to earth and mold.

If I talk of one thing, I am not.  
I bend to tangle and hold.  
Pull or cut, I release.

Who are we but the wrapping around choices,  
Thoughts and dreams, the occasional virus,  
Some dust and fluid, a speck of desire and spirit?

Rig our bonds like sailors or cowboys,  
Scouts or tailors, lash selves to cultures,  
Masts of meaning, one of many cosmic misty toys

Discovering velcro.

## *Acts of Confession*

Wanderer of the night  
I Am  
Simpler than said before  
I strip off this form  
So frail and hesitant  
I cleanse the sin from my bones  
Dry the sweat and tears of my toil  
I take out my heart. Let it breathe  
Fresh Air.

Moon is my witness  
As the transformation begins,  
If slowly,  
To restore once more:

That which was lost  
So long before

*Mischief in the Heavens*

Here they go again:  
Time with her pinwheel face

And Space, whose titanic feet  
Stand tippy-toe on cesium atoms

To peer over the fourth wall  
For the sacred cookie jar of the gods.

How they frown to find it stuffed  
With human souls that taste like carob.

It's like Karma coming by with another damn fruitcake.



## *Dragon Jazz*

Woke up and thought I was Moses.  
Went to bed and knew I was worm food.

Worms feed the fish that might become dragons.  
Words feed the men that might become monsters.

In the mirror I face the monster I'm becoming.  
In the streets I face the monsters who became me!

To find myself, my teachers said look to the past,

And my past told me to find my teachers by looking  
Straight at the concrete center of

Then and Tomorrow.

I went to the West chasing its tale.  
I went to the East shooting at the moon.

I ran into God walking his secret dogs:  
He asked: "How do you like it here so far?"

My answer was close to:

"Well enough that I'll stick around for tomorrow.  
Thanks for asking."

*Thank You, Professor Rose*

For betrayal in Arabia  
You lose your head.

For betrayal in America  
You get a movie deal.

For loyalty in Russia  
You never visit the basements of Dzerzhinsky Square  
Until the Party line changes.

For loyalty in England  
You get a Shakespeare play.

For absence in America  
You get actors in office  
Wrestling with post-Cold War policies.

For absence in Africa  
You miss the struggle of post-colonials  
for whom peace  
Has no diplomatic immunity.

For a presence in Kuwait  
The Kurds get gassed when you leave

For a presence in Vietnam  
You get told to get out.

For people who major in political science  
They can bag groceries if they want.

For people who dig ditches  
They can build empires instead, if they stop.

## *Tempus Fugit*

Time flies, but it's going in circles too,  
A celestial hula hoop  
For a shimmying deity's tiniest toys  
Pinned to obscure orbits.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose,

Racing at full tilt like an old Spanish cavalier  
On a windmill course to the other end of the start line  
Grinding golden grain beneath her giant feet!

Who threw this disc into the air in the first place?  
The sun a starter pistol, the moon a stopwatch,  
Our eyes an imperfect witness

Consistently blinking before the finish line is crossed.

## *Soap*

Tiny mouths of the world, how you dread  
The floating bars in a mother's hand as they  
Are offered before the cleansing water, and foam

Without a hint of the ash and lye  
They're made from.

\*\*\*

We think: milky white bubbles signify some great purity  
Just shy of perfection against a lab-coat's chuckling scales.

That faint whiff of perfume left on the skin  
Means we have journeyed to some higher state,

And the resentful tongue will be thankful when reflective  
In some long-boned future

As it is washed into nothing like a vanishing moon  
Devoured by a malachite frog hungry for the heavens.

\*\*\*

Scrubbing and scouring, my Hera, your eyes  
Never did find those four-letter words the boy muttered.

Sitting by your righteous hearth in your splendor,  
I regret to inform you:  
His malady has spread with age, despite your damn remedies!

\*\*\*

In the news today, they say antibacterial soap  
May in fact promote the birth of wily superbacteria  
Whose monstrous nature will thrust us into the sterile arms

Of titanic pharmaceutical companies  
Who specialize in slaying such tiny hydras,  
For a price our children may be unable to afford.

## *Saigon Autumn*

Falling leaves seem so full of freedom  
dying on the Autumn wind  
Full of color  
Like a saffron monk on fire  
In the streets of Saigon  
No one understands  
Their protest

## *East Meets West*

Oh, Asia,  
Stripping in the vaults of saints,  
legs long as a Chinese Romance  
I do not dare admit admiring  
Jet hair a wild river  
plunging to your fertile seas,  
tumbling aromatic  
with a carefree laugh,  
weightless acrobatics  
a writhing bolt of silk  
unfurling in the wind  
erotic and serpentine,  
A smile as dangerous as a prowling intern—  
Your eyes know nothing of dead Tomorrows,  
drinking my soul  
like an infant at your perfect breasts,  
ageless and full in profane valleys

My hands may not touch you,  
I dare not return with your scent  
upon my heathen chest  
Inhaling deeply  
when,  
for a moment brief and unseen,  
you slip between my tired thighs  
and in my foolishness,  
I think I can talk to you  
like Washington or Jackson,  
Green as Spring,  
whispering of home  
and the Yang Tze.

## *The Fifth Wish*

Thus far? Universally  
Unfulfilled. But the most

Reflective and wise  
Draws from:

[1] The testing.  
Typically small and wasted,  
Planted seeds of awe upon delivery.

[2] Grandiose designs.  
Undone by many a devil's details  
Scratched out in red ink: "Rewards? Regrets."

[3] Folly peaks.  
Rules now learned, the clumsy tongue strives,  
Recognizes precision's value to desire. Still fails.

[4] Undoes everything.  
We return to our faceless world, as it was, but wiser.  
But not so wise

To not still seek what we cannot have. [5]



## *Insomniacafe*

If God with his hundred sacred names  
must caper about  
like a young child full of infinity  
hiding among a blade of field grass,  
grey cathedral cornerstones  
or the wizened hands of a stranger in Calcutta  
overcome with kindness  
in a cosmic game  
of peek-a-boo,  
how can he hold a grudge  
against those honest enough to say  
"I don't know if I've really seen him lately?"

Lording over a cup of cappuccino  
like an Italian monk on watch at midnight,  
I wonder briefly if the faithful will have to sit  
in a corner of paradise for a while  
for perjury.

With another sip,  
eyes wide as Daruma  
or some crazed cartoon cat,  
I wonder if I'll ever get to sleep this way...

*The You Do Devil*

Roars against the  
O God

Who knows everyone  
Is secretly made of nothing

Haunts battlefield and bedroom  
With spilled salt and uncertain accountability

Holds a minor Montana garter snake as a child,  
Slips a hand up a married London thigh

Talks in thick tongues too familiar  
For my own good

Lies in wait, idle teeth sunk deep in the aorta,  
Long neck never underfoot enough.

Pulls my strings to make me smile:

None of this is really recorded,  
Except the way I tell it to you,

So notorious for your selective amnesia.

*Hey, Einstein*

"God does not play dice with the universe."

- Albert Einstein

Playing dice in God's universe  
Doesn't get you any closer to him.  
Understanding craps  
Does as much good as knowing old maids.  
Random acts of kindness, like one-armed bandits  
Have an uncertain payoff.  
You can go fish, reach 21 and hit me,  
But divine conversations occur  
With all of the frequency of a royal straight flush  
On a blue moon in the Year of the Dragon  
During your final hour on death row, waiting for a pardon.  
  
Unfortunately, beating those odds only happens if you play.

## *Acorn*

How far from our Bodhi tree  
Today we live!

Finding shade among foreign leaves:  
Some shaped like hands,

Others, grains of khao  
Or sweet watermelon seeds.

Lifting an acorn in our light,  
The creative see a tree in the making.  
An artist, a forest sees.

But our greatest artists?

They see whole stories, epics  
Of love and life, dreams and hope glittering  
Like the fine jade sinh

Of a lovely beauty  
Meeting her heart's match for the first time

Within the laughing shade of that forest  
Alive with the magic

Of a single unpredictable acorn  
As amazing as even our distant Bodhi.

*Ketsana Haiku*

Curious searchers,  
How long do we have? Free dreams.  
Sky: Songs. Earth: Changing.

## *One Day*

Mother-in-law threw out the paper plate  
I wrote a poem on.

“What was it doing there in the first place?”  
Was her first question.

The next was: “How good could it be,  
If it fit on just one?”

Too late, the trash-man has come by  
Leaving behind only an empty bin.

Breakfast today was a McDonald’s McMuffin,  
Her treat

As she eyed my wrapper suspiciously  
Between bites.

How delicious it was!

## Lunacy

Oh, lady of cycle and changing face.  
Huntress, wise and crafty, timeless so!  
I kiss you with lips of drying ink  
Thinking you'll remember I sought you  
By the sea, among the pages of earth, within skulls

And the senseless things who do not know  
Like a city without myth,

A wild heart of incense. My eye afire.  
A lost marble rolling towards a forgiving ocean.

## *Evolve*

Father, you will be pleased to know  
The guillotine stopped falling on heads in France  
By the year I was born

After just one last fellow, whose name I cannot find  
Nor his crime. I admit I have not looked  
Very far into the matter. Curiosity is one thing,  
Morbidity is another.

Father, I saw you in the shadow of my mirrors:  
An elusive memory, known only through my mother,  
Described as “widow of \_\_\_\_” after she signed  
Those papers releasing me for adoption by the Americans.  
A paper bird.

And I know you by features mother and I do not share.

Those jungles are distant assassins of my identity.  
I cannot lift the leaves of that last tree that held you  
And curse their poor arboreal nursing. It would change nothing.

Accusations are futile.

Your last words are lost, my father,  
And I would never have understood them anyway.

I can not put you to rest. I cannot pronounce our family name.  
You are just bones among bones that cannot get up.

You are a smile gleaming, white as wax melting  
Scattered and dusting the mountains of our ancestors.

In your wake,  
I rise forth with the most delicate of freedoms...



*Q. what book would you take with you on a deserted island?*

"My own. If I'm not writing the kind of book I'd take with me, what kind of writing am I doing?"

-Somnouk Silosoth.

"I'd take along a copy of the dictionary—which, as comedian Steven Wright noted, is sort of a poem about everything. From this book one can invent virtually all others, given time."

-Eric Lorberer.

"How To Build A Boat."

-Steven Wright.

## *How to Build a Boat*

### *I. Arrival Upon This Island, Earth.*

How did we get  
To "Who?"

To "Where  
Are we?"

To "We are."

The rivers of death, myth lead to the living:  
The Nile, the Ganges, the Mekong, the Styx and Sanzu.  
The Mississippi of legend, the Amazons of dreamers.  
To oceans of mazes as simple as every open eye.

### *II. The Proven Tools To See Tomorrow.*

Don't panic.

You will fail if you don't remember arrogant Icarus-  
All your tools, naught but icons of ingenuity and not true keys,  
Defying ambitions of escape among even the most fertile forests.

Antique monoliths wager you'll be stone before long.  
Nevermore among the wonders of Paris, Lane Xang or D.C.  
If chaos trumps memory and your hearth becomes an abstraction.

Fret if you've implements but not will.

Castaway, you need not fashion the Titanic or the Ark of song,  
Some vessel more elaborate than Kon Tiki  
For your humble odyssey as a letter in the word of Life.  
Craft an even keel, a sturdy hull and rudder,

The guiding tiller lashed by vine, weed or bark.  
Be raven, not roach.

Open Pandora's box now. Unleash hope.

*III. Food for Thought.*

"I am what I am."  
Thus spake the sea salt and the First.

You, fighting sea hags, despair, vultures  
Who feast upon those surrendered, smashed minnows  
Here, among the wild things?

Prevail.  
Watch astral bodies tremble, with their puzzles of love and names.

See where you are, creature of the creator.  
Use your resources wisely: mind, body. Without and within.  
Remember and draw from the unwritten libraries of life.  
Vanquish fear, the mind killer, a little obliterator.  
Improve your conditions by inches, by days, by miles and dreams.  
Value living and liberation.  
Escape.

Occupy space with no intention of staying,  
Burn to reach another star someday.

Even if you must hunt flying pigs, electric sheep.  
*IV. Stranding Ends.*

"It is finished."

These words?  
Not necessarily the end,  
The beginning of the end,  
But perhaps a beginning's end.

All worlds? Impermanent.  
The sound of a bell, the color of a flower, prosperity and pride.  
They, a spring dream, the mighty fallen, dust for the wind so brief.

But the cosmos renews by its curious turns of storm and wave,  
Cycle and forms, shedding shells and skins, seeds and meaning.  
A monkey chase of mermaids.

We cross our pyrrhic Rubicons, our Potomacs,  
Face decisive Bach Dang and Dan-No-Ura.

Dare to begin.  
Find your song, start singing.

Even if we must die,  
We are no penned swine of inglorious spot.  
We rise from our knees against monsters, we carry on against rot!

True beginnings uncertain, true endings uncertain,  
But today will lead to tonight.  
For now, that is enough.

Like young Scheherazade, we have something to continue,  
As tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow  
Oh, may become another country.

*V. Finding Your Way.*

We, hewn stars by stars escape. Hoka hey!  
Four hundred and thirty light years away, Polaris guides steadily.  
Make your way like Nemo or Zhang He.

Traverse mosaic, a nautilus, a lotus: Bob, if not home, to destiny.  
Remember to smile when you glimpse another soul:  
Alas, unlikely some guiding Beatrice ending your comedy,  
Doubtful a pious albatross of good omen wandering but not lost,

Or divine talking tygers appraising hungrily.  
Probably only a tongue, a free eye, a strange hand. It will do.  
This moment is an anchor or a stair. A pearl or a cold locker.  
Be vigilant, accept gracefully as Job, defy the tyranny of the sea

Who would swallow your story,  
Easily, anonymously.

What are you starving for?

Vi Veri Vniversum Vivus Vici!

*VI. The Self As Somewhere To Go.*

I am not a number.  
I am free. I will not be pushed, filed or indexed  
To die some rotten cabbage resigned. I shall be defiant as Papillion,  
“No Man” escaping, an unrepentant butterfly from Devil’s Isle.

The trick to living forever is simple: Don’t die.

Whether stranded by Chiron or Alpha Centauri,  
Frogtown or the Island of Lost Misfit Children  
I will be free as Sisyphus or a lad’s ingenious genie  
Who denies no exit with a smile imagined happy.  
The stranger in a strange land, unbound  
Even if I must turn into a sea wolf, a magic nak,  
A sovereign of flying monkeys,  
A lion racing the moon  
Or Drake among the tempests or the laughing bird men.

Remember me - if at all - not as lost.

Rejoice: A way a lone a last a loved a long arrive

## *Ink: A Recipe*

Mo. Ink. Two characters:  
Hei, Black. Earth, T'u.

Labor to make this fluid.

In illumination:

Chao Kuan-Chih in the twelfth century

Composed the Mo Ch'ing: The Ink Classic.

For every dynasty prior and pending, the revered liquid

Was a foundation for constancy and changes.

The basics stay: Lampblack and glue.

Draw lampblack from fine harvests, special pines ignited.

By a flightless feather brush, your soot collected

Is mixed with glue pure as hart horns,

The hides of the hunted and the tame.

Good ink depends on good glue.

This gives texture, life.

The living, the burnt bound.

Perhaps we could consider memories, dreams teeming

Within, awaiting a brush, a pen, a surface, an open eye

In a human face.

## *Aftermaths*

Sometimes, I want to tell you.  
Laying by your side, it's a mystery to explain  
Why I gave up my poetry for so long.

It's a mystery to explain why I told you my mother is dead,  
When I really don't know what happened to her in those jungles.

I loved you, telling you everything I knew about myself,  
Only to find, as the years went on, how little I really knew.

I can't dream of my father, his face was blown off by an  
Anonymous enemy rifle before a picture could be taken.

I don't have the voice to sing songs to you,  
Or the stories, to tell our children who their grandparents

Really were.

The past has no gifts for me except an amnesiac's freedom.  
History has been swallowed into a speculative grave-

I don't have a trace anymore, except the tales of strangers  
Who saw my heritage slowly burned away

Timber by timber.

## *Boun*

By estimation, walking backwards  
Nine deuan from my birthday in Vientiane

It was April, Meh-saa,  
A few weeks prior to Phi Mai Lao  
When I was conceived  
In a private corner of my country.

Undoubtedly, it was hot.

Our loud neighbors, all grimace and grime and sweat  
Could barely wait for the full moon to make her turn,  
A reason to loosen,  
                                To sing and lamvong drunkenly,  
Dousing each other for  
                                Fortune in the streets.

There was still cleaning to be done.

By 1972, Americans introduced "April Fools"  
To our region despite the warfare dragging on.

Near the time I was born,  
Buddhist tales of Prince Vessantara  
Were told for the Boun Pha Weht.

Across the savaged countryside  
Hallowed wats filled with men of piety  
Taking vows as monks  
Collecting robed merit for their family.

Heavy in my mother's belly,  
I entered the world  
On Wan Phi Mai Sakon



Leaving for America  
Before I heard the July sermons  
For Asanha Puja.

Thirty years later in California  
I ask Mae  
If I am anywhere close to the truth.  
I am uncertain she sees value in speculation.

“What do holidays have anything to do  
With who you are?” she asks, laughing heartily  
At the only facts I had to work with  
To find her.

*A Wat Is To Temple*  
*As To Escape Is To Survive*

Among the many stone Buddhas  
A novice from Luang Prabang  
Barely half my naïve years  
Beneath those loose robes:

Caught seconds before  
The next orange prayer  
Walking towards nirvana,  
His smile precocious.

I wondered if someday  
in a distant century  
we would see

a statue of him

paving the way  
for my children

## *Golden Triangle, Holy Mountain*

Will I ever see poppies  
In their natural habitat?  
How red they appear in  
All of these pictures beside  
Mountain women with their  
Dark turbans  
Dour and thin  
Up to their waists in grass.  
Leftover bombs loiter  
At their cautious feet  
Who have no time for  
Strangers pleading with  
Them to say cheese

Gone with a flash of light  
Before the harvest is done

*Hmong Market At Luang Prabang*

If I am successful,  
I will be immortal and misunderstood.

If these emaciated girls on the candlelit street  
Of Luang Prabang are successful,

They understand they will live for another melting day  
Dreaming idly of an ink-faced man like me  
Who will whisk them away for good,

Only he's perfect, always remembering his pinky promise  
To come back the next night

To buy their dusty bed sheets  
For a fistful of wrinkled kip.

## *Our Dinner with Cluster Bombs*

Our pilot packs a Makarov  
Flying into the outskirts  
Of the old province capitol  
Long since delivered to kingdom come.

It's bleak, this once-thriving home of ours  
Now just a pile of broken jars  
Serenading the paint chips and charred spars  
Of the human spirit.

Our hotel is ringed with bomb-tails  
And inert Browning machine guns from distant days  
Of immolation.

It's all the rage in décor.

The markets of carcass thrive because  
There is no refrigeration to speak of:  
Power fails them here, except from 5 to 11  
When coincidentally, the best state-run TV is on.

The hills pulse with rank ghosts no one wants to mention.

These roads are emblems of narrow and nothing.

When it is time to eat, we have no difficulties finding  
Empty seats, cracking, astral in their depths.

Our hostess strikes a match heavy with sulfur.

In the glow, we see their candleholders here:  
Rusty yellow cans with brass fins and screw-on tops  
Delivered direct from American aviation, yet flawed.  
Failed agents of flame and whirlwind now somewhat tamed

Their menace barely noticeable  
As she serves us her cream of mushroom soup.  
She swears it's a local favorite these days.

We don't have the heart to compare it to Campbell's to her face.

*E Pluribus Unum*

Youa tells me a story over the hot hibachi:  
How she went to Laos  
To see her lucky sisters

For the first time in two decades,  
Since the country has loosened up enough  
To let tourists like us in.

"Isn't it beautiful?" she asks me,  
Then says she gave her sister Mayli \$50  
To help her family.

When Youa returned to the Twin Cities,  
She learned her sister had been murdered  
For the money

By Mayli's ex-husband, who'd heard  
Of their family reunion  
And thought the cash rightfully belonged to him.

"Did you give your relatives anything?"  
She asks.

"Yes," I reply. "\$500. But they say they need more  
To get to America."

## *A Crime In Xieng Khouang*

Someone stole my boots from  
A Phonsavan porch  
Around dinner time  
In the dark.

I suspect it was my tour guide-  
The one who trained to be a diplomat,  
Whose future drained away  
With the American departure.

When I first bought them,  
The box proclaimed they were  
“Hard To Kill”  
And by extension, I assume,  
So was I, though there were no  
written words to that effect.  
Forty dollars is a good price  
But it’s nearly a year’s pay  
In these parts.

I should have known  
New American boots  
In an Asian size  
Don’t come by often near  
The Plain of Jars.

He stole them from me,  
And is now slogging through  
The sucking muddy waste  
Cluttered with tiny rusting bombies  
My America dropped decades ago  
For the good of Lao democracy.

His English is exceptional,



But he knows he is going to die here  
With his dreams  
While I return home easily  
To get a replacement.

I have to forgive him,  
Feeling like a thief  
Looking for shiny new boots  
Just past the American flags in the aisle.

## *Khop Jai For Nothing, Falangs*

The bomb popped in his face  
While he was digging a fire pit

For his family squatting  
On the old mercenary camp

In Xieng Khouang province  
So notorious for its UXO.

“They live there for the American plumbing,”  
Our host said flatly,  
Watching volleyball games by the airstrip.

This was wholly routine.

The ruined grounds were frozen.  
Explosives, dormant blooms below  
Can be mistaken for ice and rock easily.

And he screamed

The whole while as we loaded  
Him into the back of our rickety plane  
To Vientiane that

Lao Aviation picked up from  
The Russians when everyone

Thought the Cold War  
Was going somewhere.

The California girl on holiday  
Was aghast and found it

Quite unscenic.

What a pall on her search for highs.

In Wat Inpeng,

A monk named Souk

Confided discretely:

“We really hate hippies.”

## *The National Library of Laos*

Behind the Lane Xang Hotel she waits,  
Her hard gate a shabbily wrapped sinh.

She doesn't expect company these days,  
But her quiet mouth of paper  
Knows the songs of poets, mechanics,  
Of Marx and Engels

And dissipated dreams  
Over thirty years old.

She smiles when I stop by, but  
We both feel awkward;  
An aura of mutual failures  
Nibbles our simple hearts.

She wants to talk, to shout and strut,  
To sing of everything, even the forbidden.  
She hates being the reminder  
Of what could have been.

She shows me  
A cardboard globe  
She uses to dream of the world;  
Who am I, to reveal: half of those countries  
Don't exist anymore.

I found a dusty epic of flight  
Nestled in one of her shelves,  
And told her my family in America  
Owned the same book, when I was a child.

I don't know if that was a comfort.

While her back was turned, I slipped  
A tiny note of hope into a lonesome book of art  
For her next visitor, uncertain it will ever be found.

I forget what I wrote precisely,

Walking away on Setthathirat Street  
To go and look for my mother.

## *Recovery*

Staring at my mother's former home her  
Old neighbors show me proudly:

Old wounds. Boarded up, every dusty nailed window  
Denies my eyes that would dare prize such

A worn hovel, root of my restless conjectures.

It's anticlimactic.

The house is a shingled blank, what's left,  
What remains.

They tell me I've come all this way  
But she's already in California.

They ask me to show them where it is,  
Compared to where I live.

I may as well tell them about  
Quarks and fission, or the mechanics  
Of perpetual motion, but draw the map  
Anyway.

I know I should cry, but smile,  
Defying the one thousand ways  
Things could have been worse.

We call my mother from a Vientiane phone.

Her first words to me ever are: "Hi, Honey,  
How do you like my country?"

And I never wanted to get out of one place

So fast as this moment,

Wishing I was a kiss that could reach  
Through an ocean of wires, alive,

Alive and distant.

## *Departures*

The monks gave me a bag of Thai oranges  
Before I left for the States.

Next time I come, I'll have learned more Lao,  
I promise.

They promise there will be more to show the next time.

Sitting outside the Khop Jai Deu restaurant  
Waiting for my bus to come

Elvis is crooning "Return to Sender"  
Because there's no such number,  
And no such home.

I took a photo of the fountain  
Next to the Scandinavian Bakery,  
Tuk-tuk drivers loitering nearby.

Handing them some fruit,  
They ask, "How long are you staying in Laos?"

And I reply,  
"This is my last day."

The sun looks like it could be peeled wide open  
While I take a bite of a giant orange,

Trying to wring out a last memory from this light,  
Wondering when the King's song is ever going to end

The scent of citrus on my hand  
Sinks deeply past my bones,  
Trying to harden into an anchor



The shape of a kind heart.

*Jaew*

Goes in hot. Comes out hot.  
But this may be more than the casual student  
Will want to know.

Mom's grinding chilies for me in Modesto.  
Red, green, a dash of fresh cilantro,  
Fermented shrimp sauce and a pinch of salt  
Between her mortar and pestle.

Dabbing a sticky ball of khao nhio  
Into the tiny ceramic saucer, I know

She's a sorceress  
In her kitchen

Trying to find a way to say  
She loves me, hoping my prodigal tongue  
Is still Lao enough  
To understand what her broken English cannot convey.

My eyes are cisterns of tears after 30 years.  
I should say "mak phet" and grab some cold milk  
But with a smile through the pain I stammer  
"Saep lai, Mae, delicious, Mom.  
Saep lai, hak Mae lai lai."

"Don't talk, just eat," she says between her tears.

*Leuk Lao*

We meet on the road  
But once and I cannot tell you

In the time we have:  
"We are one."

"What's left, what survived, what remains  
Of old dreams, old wars, old loves."

We share atomic lives:

Small, brief, unpredictable orbits,  
Curious flurries of motion and smiles.

Who you become after I go,  
I can only guess

Except by the photos  
Of occasional touring strangers

In which I watch you grow,

While you remember an eye,  
A camera, a wave goodbye.